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Facilitating peer tutors in elementary school guidance programs

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Abstract

Peer tutoring is perhaps one of the greatest sources for mobilizing unused potentialities for learning and for controlling the factors which block or retard learning. The failure to use peer tutors in a variety of forms is a major source of waste in schools (Wagner, 1982). Society holds to an ideal that children will grow into responsible citizens who care for and help others. Yet, rarely do schools permit children to assume and practice these responsibilities. Nor do schools systematically supervise or actively shape effective helping behaviors (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981).

Facilitating Peer Tutors in Elementary School Guidance Programs

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Peer tutoring is perhaps one of the greatest sources for mobilizing unused potentialities for learning and for controlling the factors which block or retard learning. The failure to use peer tutors in a variety of forms is a major source of waste in schools (Wagner, 1982).

Society holds to an ideal that children will grow into responsible citizens who care for and help others. Yet, rarely do schools permit children to assume and practice these responsibilities. Nor do schools systematically supervise or actively shape effective helping behaviors (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981).

Johnson and Johnson (1974) indicate the most desirable goal structure for promoting achievement in problem solving tasks is a cooperative one. Cooperation, as compared with competition, serves as a means of teaching individual differences, teaches the ability to communicate effectively, helps in the cognitive development of the individual, develops empathy, and, particularly, eliminates failure and its accompanying feeling (Wagner, 1982).

At times it seems the elementary counselor's job is endless with responsibility for some tasks which encroach upon their counseling time. Often there is only one counselor per school, regardless of the school population, and counselors have had to rely upon small and large group procedures.

Consequently, many counselors are turning to peer tutoring as one solution to reaching more students (Gartner, Kohler, & Riessman, 1971).

A carefully designed peer tutoring program would help address these issues at the elementary school. The purpose of this paper will be to examine how elementary counselors can be facilitators of peer tutoring programs for the benefit of everyone involved.

Historical Development of Peer Tutoring

Until the 1960's there is little mention of peer tutoring in educational literature. The one exception, however, is the use of peer tutoring in one-room schools of rural United States in the latter part of the nineteenth and in the early twentieth centuries. Teachers in one-room schools often called upon their older students to help teach the younger ones (Woofter, 1917). During the 1960's, the idea of students tutoring students became more widely used and researched (Elliot, 1973; Schmuck, 1977; Thelen, 1969). Since then, literature on the theory, research, and practice of peer tutoring has proliferated (Dineen, Clark, & Risley, 1977; Melanangno, 1977; Scruggs & Richter, 1985a).

Gartner, Kohler, and Riessman (1971) wrote the first major volume on peer tutoring. In the introduction they wrote, "every child must be given the opportunity to play

the teaching role, because it is through playing this role that he may really learn how to learn" (Gartner, Kohler, & Riessman, 1971, p. 1).

Allen (1976) dealt with the theoretical considerations underlying peer tutoring by indicating students should have more responsibility for educating their peers. Peer teaching can give a sense of purpose and participation so often lacking in a child's life.

During the past ten years professional literature has urged elementary counselors to include peer tutors as an integral part of their counseling programs (Douherty, Fowler, & Paine, 1985; Huey, 1985; Jenkins & Jenkins, 1981). What is so special about peer tutors and helpers to warrant all the expansion and support?

Theoretical Considerations

Peer tutoring addresses various educational, psychological, and social needs of children. The most common explicit goal of peer tutoring is that of academic gain for the student being tutored (Cohen, 1986). This goal is attained by mere exposure to and rehearsal of learned material. Peer tutoring can also be used for teaching new material and for "learning to learn."

Although not the explicit goal of peer tutoring, the tutor can also benefit from the peer-tutoring experience

(Cohen, 1986). Students benefit academically as much by tutoring as they do by being tutored (Risley, Clark, & Dineen, 1977). Peer tutoring appears to be a useful method of individualizing education which involves no after-school hours or movement of children from classes. This one-to-one ratio of teacher to pupil maximizes the active participation of pupil and teacher, which, according to Piaget's theory and findings, enhances comprehension and the development of cognitive-organizational skills (Cohen, 1986).

The individualized character of peer tutoring facilitates a reliable, consistent, and effective use of motivation techniques for the tutor and tutee. The motivational system in peer tutoring consists of tangible, social, academic, and moral reinforcements (Cohen, 1986). Mohan (1972) found that poorly motivated students were positively affected when they tutored unmotivated younger children. Both objective attitude scales and subjective teacher ratings showed that tutors increased in motivational level, self-concept, attitudes toward school, and in mathematics--the subject they taught. Providing low-achieving students the opportunity to receive experience as peer tutors allows them the chance to feel needed, important, and worthwhile as well as encouraging them to take more responsibility for learning and for becoming more involved in the learning process (Bowman & Myrick, 1983).

Besides its benefits as a teaching and learning experience, peer tutoring is also a social experience. It provides peers with an opportunity to interact, to get to know each other, and to develop the social skills of listening, understanding, soliciting and delivering help, and communicating clearly. For the tutor, it provides experience in empathy, managing and organizing, persistence, taking on responsibility, and sticking to a work schedule (Cohen, 1986). Peer tutors can talk with alienated students and give them opportunities to share their ideas and feelings, to explore their attitudes and behaviors, and think about their goals and the meaning of school for them (Bowman & Myrick, 1983).

A study done with kindergarten children with behavior and learning problems showed that inappropriate behavior can be reduced and participation increased through a peer-monitored point system (Fowler, 1986). Interestingly, the children whose behavior improved as a result of peer monitoring maintained appropriate behavior on the days in which they were the monitors. Being monitored by a peer and being the peer monitor were at least equivalent in degree to which the procedures affected behavior (Fowler, 1986).

Peer tutoring as a social experience is similar to cooperation. A cooperative social structure is one in which the goals for each of the individuals can be achieved only

if all other individuals in the structure can reach their respective goals (Cohen, 1986). An appreciation of the cooperative nature of peer tutoring has deep implications for interpersonal relations. Research on cooperative structure has shown them to promote positive interpersonal relations, characterized by mutual liking, positive attitudes towards peers, friendliness, and attentiveness (Johnson & Johnson, 1974). Cooperation seemed to reduce anxiety in and improve attitudes towards academic situations.

The tutor's high status can improve his/her self-concept, self-confidence and self-esteem, notably among those tutors known as underachievers and/or poorly motivated students. As the tutor makes significant academic gains he/she will feel better integrated within the academic setting and thus positive attitudes may improve. The tutee's self-esteem also may be enhanced by the collaborative experience with a high status peer (Cohen, 1986). A study of different tutoring conditions show that the core of any successful peer tutoring program is the social interaction of the tutor/tutee pairs. In fact, the introduction of a reward altered the tone of the tutoring sessions (Morgan & Szynal-Brown, 1986). Of course, attitudinal and self-concept measures are more difficult to assess than academic ones. Several research findings in this area have been inconclusive (Devin-Sheehan,

Feldman, & Allen, 1976; Klosterman, 1970; Morgan & Toy, 1970; Shaver & Nuhn, 1971).

Peer-tutoring programs often differ in many ways making it difficult to isolate the factors that may be mediating attitude change. Outcomes have been related to a variety of program characteristics, ranging from tutor sex, race, previous training, or the effects of tutor-tutee sibling relationships (Bierman & Furman, 1981). Research needs to be expanded to include attitudinal measures for both tutor and tutee to enable evaluation of any possible detrimental effects on the tutee. Peer-tutoring can be useful for fostering positive attitudes and self-concept, but the nature and degree of their impact depends on the way in which such arrangements are presented to and perceived by the children involved (Bierman & Furman, 1981).

The peer tutoring role also requires the use of many tutoring skills: listening, patience, observation, understanding, monitoring, correcting, self-disclosing, supporting others, and handling conflicts constructively. Some of these tutorial skills can be developed through training, which may be especially necessary for child-tutors, who have yet to develop many social skills (Cohen, 1986). Two different approaches for training tutors appear in the literature. One line of research compares tutors trained to

use a specific technique with tutors who are completely untrained (Ellson, Barber, Engle, & Kampwerth, 1965). A second and smaller body of research examines the relative effectiveness of certain types of training (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen, 1976). Gumaer (1984) found that 80 per cent of the peer facilitators and 72 per cent of the peers felt as if they learned skills in a peer-tutoring program which would continue to be helpful.

Same-age peer tutors can deliver drill-type instruction and students can work successfully in this situation. Tutors can learn teaching and tutoring skills which will benefit them beyond the peer-tutoring experience (Wagner, 1982).

Implications for the Implementation of Peer Teaching

Anecdotal and nonexperimental evidence suggests that children with a variety of personal characteristics benefit from acting as tutors to young children (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen, 1976). Evidence suggests that people of various ages and backgrounds can function effectively as tutors or tutees (Cohen, 1986). Both tutors and tutees may be selected to improve their academic levels. Since peer tutoring presents a secure social situation, it can therefore be used to introduce isolated individuals to social situations.

It may also be used for improving communication skills (Cohen, 1986).

Perhaps the most critical component in any peer tutoring program is choosing the students for the program (Campbell, 1983). Peer tutors can be trained to work in various helping situations. Consideration should be given to matching the tutors and tutees and for choosing the materials for the academic goals desired for the tutee. The needs, attitudes, and values of the students and teachers determine the types of projects in which the peer tutors will participate. Soliciting faculty and administrative input before determining the goals and objectives of a training program ensures support for the program (Campbell, 1983).

The amount of structure and supervision should match the age and level of the peers. The younger, more dependent, less capable, and less motivated the students are, the more external structure and supervision should be maintained by external agents (Cohen, 1986). At least some supervision, feedback, and reinforcement is needed for the tutor in maintaining any peer tutoring program (Campbell, 1983).

Efforts on the part of counselors to train students for peer-tutoring are proving to benefit the students and the schools. Peer tutors experience personal growth and they extend themselves to help others grow and flourish.

Applications for Peer Tutoring in Elementary Guidance Programs

Too often students experience transitional problems in moving to a new school or in moving from one grade or one building to another. If a smooth transition is not achieved, difficulties can develop that may impair the student's opportunity for a successful school experience (Huey, 1985). Peer tutors can be of assistance in helping the counselor help students with these transitions.

One orientation program utilizes the concept of information processing through peer tutors. Peer tutors provide information to familiarize students with content through exploration, classification, questioning, discussion, and other interactive techniques (Huey, 1985). An orientation program with this approach results in an increase of understanding, acceptance, and adherence to expected school behaviors.

Children tend to behave defiantly most often in settings with infrequent adult supervision and intervention, such as, on a playground (Dougherty, Fowler, & Paine, 1985). Peer tutors or helpers can be enlisted by the counselor as playground supervisors. Peer mediation can produce effects comparable to those achieved with adult-mediated interventions. Behavior improvement observed in children in this playground

project was greatest in the behavior of the monitors themselves (Dougherty, Fowler, & Paine, 1985).

Recent reviews of peer tutoring programs in special education settings indicates this to be a promising type of intervention (Osguthorpe & Scruggs, 1986; Scruggs & Richter, 1985b; Scruggs, Mastropieri, & Richter, 1985). Frequently special education students have been used as tutees in such interventions. In other investigations, special education students have been used as the tutors of other special or remedial students (Osguthorpe & Scruggs, 1986; McCraken, 1979; Sindelar, 1982). Peer tutoring certainly appears to be a positive alternative to independent seat work or practice activities for special education students.

Peer tutoring programs developed in the Lippitt Project (Lippitt & Lippitt, 1968) had multiple goals of stimulating older tutors, providing academic and motivational help for younger children, and developing friendship and mutual regard for students of all ages (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen, 1976). In a three-year program involving six schools in two districts, seventh and eighth grade students tutored 120 low-achieving fourth and fifth grade students. The strongest positive findings were in the area of academic gains for both tutors and tutees (Devin-Sheehan, Feldman, & Allen, 1976).

The concept of peer tutoring could be utilized in a "special" friend project. Children who might benefit from a special friend are not difficult to find. Special friend peers could be role models for students with behavior problems and can help them learn alternative behaviors (Canning, 1983).

A comprehensive counseling program at the elementary school level should include a peer tutoring component. A peer tutoring program can help develop deep bonds of friendship between the tutor and the person being helped. This bond is important for integrating slow learners into the group. Peer tutoring takes pressure off the teacher by allowing her to teach a large group and at the time allows the slow learners the individual attention they need. The tutors themselves benefit by learning to teach, a general skill that can be very useful in society (Wagner, 1982).

There are several reasons for having the elementary counselor act as the facilitator of the peer tutoring program. Since a peer tutoring program will likely cross-over between classes and between ages, it is necessary to have someone who is familiar with a large number of students at the elementary school. The counselor is in a position to match tutors with tutees in a mutually beneficial way.

Many of the skills that are necessary for training tutors are ones that use small group instruction. The counselor is

able to meet with small groups of students to teach necessary skills. Instruction and practice can also take place during any classroom guidance time that is scheduled.

A peer tutoring program will increase the impact of the elementary counselor by keeping him in contact with a large number of students both directly and indirectly. This exposure to a larger number of students who would make successful tutors provides the counselor with an opportunity for positive involvement that would not be available otherwise. The impact that a counselor may have on the entire school atmosphere will be enhanced through the efforts and training of peer tutors.

When the idea of teaching basic skills in schools is brought up little mention is made of skills like listening, observation, understanding, empathy, and patience. Yet, when you consider what makes for a successful student and for a successful person these skills are basic. These skills certainly should make up a significant part of any elementary counselor's teaching curriculum. Learning takes place best through experience. Through a peer tutoring experience students will learn skills which will benefit others, themselves, and their school in the process.

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