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PEER-TUTORING: LEARNING BOON OR EXPLOITATION OF THE TUTOR?

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The concept of peer tutoring is not new. Its use has been traced back through centuries. Probably all elementary school teachers have used it at some time—usually in the brief, informal situation of having Billy help Jimmy with some specific problem or skill need. In recent years, the idea has expanded and the more formal peer-tutoring or peer-mediated instruction concept has received attention and support. This increased interest in peer-tutoring appears to have been prompted by the need to individualize instruction and to do so as economically as possible.

To give educational legitimacy to the expanding practice of peer-tutoring, justification in terms of learning benefits began appearing. The derived benefits from peer-tutoring are based mainly on two cognitive premises: (1) tutees (those being tutored) will make significant gains in achievement; and (2) tutors will increase significantly their own learning through teaching others. Other premises are in the affective domain and emphasize improved pupil relationships and self-concepts.

Much of the writing about peer-tutoring uses the tutee as the focus for examination and most report this technique as being beneficial for the tutee. Certainly the effects of peer-tutoring on the tutee are highly important, but the effects on the tutor need equal consideration. Studies based on the tutor are fewer in number, but reveal some interesting information.

There have been reports of various practices in the use of tutors. For organizational purposes, these practices can be divided into two main groups. One group concerns the grade level relationship of tutor to tutee—cross-age tutoring and in-class tutoring. The other group concerns the achievement level of the tutor—learning deficient, on or above level for his ability, and gifted.

In studies in which cross-age tutoring was carried on with underachievers as both tutors and tutees, East (1976) found that significant gains were made by both tutors and tutees at the .05 level of confidence. Results from this study further showed significant gains both in reading and self-esteem for the tutors. These results were attributed basically to several main factors. One dealt with cross-age grouping involving three or more years difference in grades. Because of this difference, it was thought that there would be less jealousy and friction and more of a model or image concept. The empathy of one underachiever for another was the basis of another factor. A third was that teaching others enhances the role of learning.

In another report of a cross-age tutoring trial, Lawrence (1975) stated that there was a gain in the communication skills of the tutors. No evidence was given to confirm this however.

Willis and Crowder (1974) reported on a project in which twelve eighth graders who participated as tutors in a seven month tutoring program for deficient readers were matched in terms of achievement and ability with twelve eighth graders in the same school who did not participate in the tutoring program. The participating eighth graders, both tutors and members of the control group, were achieving at or above level for their ability. The project was focused on the amount of achievement made by tutors. Results revealed that while the tutors gained nine months in reading achievement in the seven month program, the control group made a median gain of eleven months during the same period.

Peer-Mediated Instruction (PMI) is based on in-class pairing with each child working as both tutor and tutee in the attempt to provide for individualizing instruction. In his research on PMI, Rosenbaum (1973) reported that effective interaction was hindered whenever a very weak learner and a very strong learner were paired. He stated:

There are, not surprisingly, critical limits to the difference between two students in their ability to execute procedures. When these limits are exceeded, it is as if the learners are suddenly speaking two different languages, with neither being able to get his own needs satisfied or to satisfy his own demands or those of his partner, this often leading to a breakdown of the dyadic relationship (p. 57).

Even though this program seems more learning-partner based than tutor-based, the implications for ability pairing are significant, especially in terms of how gifted children are used as tutors. To overcome problems in interpersonal relations, two suggestions were made; pairings should be made randomly rather than matched, and pairings should be changed each class or session.

In most of the peer-tutoring programs reported, time was needed to train the tutors in how to work with tutees and in many instances in the skills to be taught. As one example, the Tutorial-Community Program (TCP) (Newmark 1976) employed an extensive training program for tutors. This training program contained five to seven sessions of thirty to fifty minutes each. After the initial training period, the tutor spent thirty minutes every day in planning, preparing, or tutoring. Throughout the tutoring program, the teacher worked with the tutors to provide specific directions and materials.

On the surface, some of these programs and practices have great appeal. However, in considering the described tutor time and effort and teacher time and effort expended in peer-tutoring weighed against the results cited in research studies, several questions keep emerging.

If tutors with learning deficiencies made significant gains in their own achievement from the tutoring experience, then:

1. could the same amount of specialized and personalized attention to their needs produce equivalent or greater achievement gains for them?
2. could their self-esteem improve and be more lasting if it is based on self-achievement rather than on a transitory tutor/tutee relationship?

If, as was recorded, tutors on or above level according to their ability achieved less than the matched control group, then:

1. could the same amount of time as that spent in tutoring activities be used more gainfully if directed to the specific needs of the tutor?
2. could the use of gifted children as tutors hinder or even retard their own learning growth?

If problems exist in tutor/tutee relationships because of ability or other differences, then: could the time spent in matching pairs or in changing pairs be used to better advantage in other experiences in which students are on more of an equal rather than tutor basis?

If there are some ways to use peer-tutoring beneficially, then:

AT WHAT POINT DOES PEER-TUTORING CHANGE FROM AN EFFECTIVE LEARNING TECHNIQUE TO THE EXPLOITATION OF YOUNGSTERS?

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