



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

The Diverse Nuances of Learning. Multiple Facets of Peer Education in a Case Study in Northern Italy

Giulia Maria Cavaletto*, Federica Cornali**, Tanja Schroot***, Martina Visentin****

Author information

- * Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, Padova, Italy.
Email: giuliamaria.cavaletto@unipd.it
- ** Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, Turin, Italy.
Email: federica.cornali@unito.it
- *** Department of Political Science, Law and International Studies, Padova, Italy.
Email: martina.visentin@unipd.it
- **** Department of Cultures, Politics and Society, Turin, Italy.
Email: tanja.schroot@unito.it

Article first published online

March 2024

HOW TO CITE

Cavaletto G. M., Cornali F., Schroot T., Visentin M. (2024) "The Diverse Nuances of Learning. Multiple Facets of Peer Education in a Case Study in Northern Italy" *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 16(1), 26-44.

DOI: 10.14658/PUPJ-IJSE-2024-1-2

The Diverse Nuances of Learning. Multiple Facets of Peer Education in a Case Study in Northern Italy

Giulia Maria Cavaletto, Federica Cornali, Tanja Schroot, Martina Visentin

Abstract: Peer-led approaches emphasize learner autonomy by affirming that the process of knowledge and skills acquisition does not correspond to a passive intake of information, but that understanding must be actively constructed in collaboration. Accordingly, learning is configured as a situated, active, and creative process. The introduction of peer-learning in the Italian education system is progressing very slowly, despite a continuing academic interest in the potential of the didactic method as an innovative asset in a structured school organization with prevailing standardized procedures. Drawing on these premises, this contribution aims to present the experience related to the application of particular forms of peer-led approaches. Specifically, the authors have been analysing peer-to-peer and peer-for-peer practices carried out as part of a pilot phase within the EU-funded Horizon project entitled 'KIDS4ALL'. The analysis of this study is grounded on qualitative data from students, teachers and educators who have been testing the proposed peer-led learning method in non-formal educational contexts in Turin and Padua. Major findings suggest that learning with new methodologies which put the learner at the centre of the process, may potentially respond to contemporary challenges of non-formal educational settings, if continuously adopted and accompanied by trained educational staff. Instead, intermittent and random interventions for the sake of forced didactic innovation in the classroom might entail unexpected effects on the development of competences for students and educational staff.

Keywords: cooperative learning, peer-to-peer, peer-for-peer, children agency

Introduction

For several decades, the multidisciplinary debate on innovative teaching methods and techniques has opened up to the theme of peer education as a tool to promote learning, to develop social skills, to support inclusion, to acquire essential skills to face the challenges of everyday life, and to enter into the labour market. The theoretical systematisation and the affirmation of these methods date back about forty years ago with the first publications dedicated to cooperative learning (Sharan et al., 1984; Slavin, 1980, 1986, 1987); however, their widespread application in learning contexts occurred notably later. It is a fertile field of study from which heterogeneous experiences have emerged; to date, in fact, the peer education label includes a wide variety of peer education practices, ranging from reciprocal teaching to peer mentoring and peer tutoring (Gillies, 2015; Baloché & Brody, 2017).

Despite the interest shown by the academic world, the introduction of peer education, in its various forms in the Italian educational landscape has moved slowly. Broadly speaking, there haven't been any comments regarding the method's potential in both cognitive and relational aspects. Nevertheless, challenges of implementing it within a well-organised school system that prioritises standardised procedures have been emphasised. Nonetheless, it has persistently remained one of the most commonly used active learning teaching approaches, particularly during the initial educational stages.

Even without a direct mention of the theoretical framework that underpins these techniques, educators, utilizing their established teaching approach, assemble students into collaborative groups and encourage them to work together. They prompt students to create content or products together and to share reflections with their peers. However, these efforts may not be enough: effective cooperative learning requires the adequate structuring of the task to be assigned to the group, the preparation of suitable materials, but above all, the execution of tasks that adeptly cultivate in students the prosocial behaviours essential for successful collaboration (Comoglio & Cardoso, 1996; Cohen & Lotan, 2014).

After a brief illustration of the literature on the subject, this contribution will present the experience related to the application of particular forms of peer-led approaches. Specifically, we will analyse the peer-to-peer and peer-for-peer practices carried out within the EU-funded Horizon project (Innovation Action) called 'Key Inclusive Development Strategies for Life-Long Learning'. The aim is to understand the potential and limits of peer education in relation to the conditions that allow its application.

Literature review

Numerous interpretations of peer education exist, and these have become more detailed and polished over time, evolving in response to diverse experiences within various educational settings. Certainly, the extensive array of its applications renders it almost impossible to establish a single definition. Simple explanations used to delineate cooperative learning such as “learning together” (Johnson & Johnson, 1975) and “education of young people by young people” (Shiner, 1999) generally refer to a series of instructional activities that recognize children and adolescents as social actors who interact with adults in a mutually constitutive way. Consequently, students take on the role of central figures in the educational landscape, departing from traditional teaching approaches that regarded them as passive recipients of instructional endeavours. Slavin defines cooperative learning as “a set of instructional methods in which students work in small, mixed-ability learning groups [...] The students in each group are responsible not only for learning the material being taught in class, but also for helping their groupmates learn” (Slavin, 1987, p. 3). Therefore, within both its declinations of peer learning and peer teaching, the peer-led approach aims to activate a communication process for the transfer of knowledge and experiences among the members of a group not only for learning and teaching purposes, but also for the co-construction of new meanings, thus calling into question not only curricular cognitive aspects, but also social, emotional and relational skills.

While the notion that all forms of learning are collaborative and influenced by social contexts is primarily attributed to the constructivist and sociocultural educational paradigms, the autonomy of children and teenagers within various socialization environments gained notable traction during the emergence of the New Childhood Sociology in the 1990s (James & Prout, 1990). Peer-led approaches in schools emphasize student agency by reaffirming that learning does not correspond to a passive reception of information but understanding and knowledge are actively constructed by students, often in cooperation with other students (Biesta, 2006). Accordingly, learning is configured as a situated, active, creative process of social and cultural construction, carried out within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lave, 2009).

The advantages stemming from the utilization of peer-based collaborative techniques pertain not primarily to curriculum-based learning, which encompasses the subjects within study programs, but rather to the diverse range of attributes frequently labelled as “social and emotional skills” and “transversal skills” (John & Bates, 2024). In recent decades, the significance of this aspect in the development of young individuals has grown, driven by the firmly established realization that proficiency in studies, as well as in

various aspects of personal life, relies on the indispensability of “non-cognitive” skills. These skills refer to different models: studies sometimes refer to them as a combination of the “Four Cs” (communication, collaboration, critical thinking/problem solving, and creativity) (National Education Association, 2011); otherwise they are referred to as the Big Five (OECD, 2015) or are included in the lists of skills essential to people for personal fulfilment (Council of the European Union, 2018).

The positive effects of skills such as cooperation, responsibility, organization, leadership management, problem solving, and of attitudes such as trust, meta-reflection, perseverance and respect for the other (Briggs, 2013; Hattie, 2015) make peer education not only effective on the individual subject but also on the group (or class) to which it belongs. The group is considered a “socially mediated” resource, in which the main learning resources are the students themselves and the social relationships they are able to activate (Becker, 2012; Johnson & Johnson, 2013).

In particular, ‘peerness’ becomes a method of choice for addressing personal and potentially sensitive issues: young people prefer to talk to peers rather than adult professionals and can share more information on topics that interest or concern them. It is therefore not surprising that cooperative learning experiences have spread especially to address issues such as drugs, sex and sexuality, race and racism and mental health (Bottomley et al., 1995; Barnard & McKeganey, 1996), but also to contrast deviant behaviour (bullying and cyberbullying), and for the development of citizenship skills in their broadest sense (Johnson & Johnson, 2016; Van Ryzin, Cil & Roseth, 2023; Diac & Grădinariu, 2023). Due to its emphasis on group interactions and its recognition of individual distinctions while encouraging prosocial conduct, peer education has also evolved into a cornerstone for initiatives supporting inclusion in its most comprehensive interpretation, encompassing perspectives from disability studies and the widest spectrum of differences, be they linguistic, ethnic, religious or gender (Ware, 2004).

2. KIDS4ALL: a case study

This research sought to analyse the application of peer education and cooperative learning techniques in educational contexts. The data that informs the analysis of this research has been collected within the frame of the ‘Key Inclusive Development Strategies for Lifelong Learning – KIDS4ALL’ (2021-2024) project, financed by the European Commission within the HORIZON research and innovation funding programme established to stimulate EU-wide action towards the inclusion of migrant children in the educational context and beyond.

KIDS4ALLL involved primary, lower and upper secondary schools (ISCED grades 1, 2, 3); in some of them, educators have been designated to oversee the execution of the extracurricular project activity. The KIDS4ALLL project strives to foster the EU-defined eight Key Competences for Lifelong Learning – i.e. 1) literacy, 2) multilingualism, 3) numerical, scientific and engineering skills, 4) digital and technology-based competences, 5) interpersonal skills and ability to learn new skills, 6) active citizenship, 7) entrepreneurship, 8) cultural awareness and expression (Council of the European Union, 2018) – with ad-hoc learning contents available in digital and offline format applied through a collaborative learning scheme that consists of three complementary phases.

These stages should be undertaken by pairs of learners (denominated ‘buddy pairs’ in the project) that have been organized by teacher or educator based on predetermined criteria, including socio demographic factors (such as ethnicity, age, gender) and indicators of the peers’ competency backgrounds (such as language proficiency, previous education experience, learning challenges).

The first learning phase focuses on the acquisition and cultivation of (theoretical and applied) knowledge through both frontal and interactive learning in a peer-to-peer relationship, i.e., both learners are exposed at the same time to equal online or offline contents (‘know.what’ learning phase). The second learning phase focuses on developing skills in how to convey what has been learned to other students using analogue or digital means (‘know.how’ skill development phase). The third learning phase follows the ‘learning-by-doing’ approach to process the generated knowledge (‘work.it’ creation phase). With this goal in mind, it envisions the creation of personalized learning materials by the pair of learners. Subsequently, these co-generated materials are presented to younger and less experienced peers (peer-for-peer). The learning method adopted in the KIDS4ALLL project is illustrated in figure 1.

KIDS4ALLL provided for three macro themes: firstly, the collaborative efficacy of peer learner couples composed by teachers or educators according to pre-defined criteria. Particular attention was set on applied cooperation strategies for mutual understanding among the peer learners and recognition of the benefits of peer work for socio-educational inclusion.

The effectiveness of transitioning roles from peer learner to trainee and then to mentor has been recognized as a secondary core theme. Accordingly, the inquiry focuses on whether actions associated with the various phases of peer education were perceived as advantageous for exchanging and transferring competencies among the co-learners. The third macro theme focused on the role of the instructor within peer education learning schemes. The project, in its rather complex articulation, appears to be a particularly suit-

able context for the observation of elements which: *i*) concern the concrete application of peer education, *ii*) the role played by the main actors (students and teachers), *iii*) the possibility that this method can be continuously integrated into teaching practices.



Fig. 1 – KIDS4ALL Learning Approach

2.1 Research design

Formal (schools) and non-formal (associations) educational settings in the North-Italian regions Piedmont (Turin Metropolitan Area) and Veneto (Padua) represent the field for this case study. Both research locations provide for a decent data comparability with regard to their educational infrastructure (Belmonte et al., 2017), the organisation of teaching, after-school and adult education activities as well as the socio-cultural and ethnic composition (ISTAT, 2022) of the (student) population.

Building on these criteria, several formal (primary, lower and upper secondary schools) and non-formal educational contexts in Padua and Turin have been chosen by a reasoned choice for the implementation of the KIDS4ALL intervention, that provided for the testing of didactic material and an online learning platform through peer-led learning processes from October 2022 to June 2023. Between February and May 2023, data collection was conducted through:

- 11 naturalistic observations in ISCED 1, 2, 3 classes with an average of 23 students (ranging between 12 and 18 years)
- 3 focus groups (consisting on average of 6 participants) with teachers, ISCED 1, 2, 3 school principals and stakeholders
- 6 interviews with ISCED 1, 2, 3 educators and teachers

The research design of this study is grounded in a bottom-up approach based on a qualitative data collection, which is confirmed by the choice of naturalistic observations, focus groups and semi-structured interviews as leading research methods. Naturalistic observations were collected in an observation diary, while a verbatim report of the recorded focus groups and interviews with corresponding transcriptions was provided.

To obtain a more holistic perspective of the study focus and to enhance completeness and validity of data (Thurmond, 2001; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), the research team decided on a triangulation of investigators and methodologic approaches. The combination of the data-gathering techniques had been thought to capture the entire experience of peer-to-peer and peer-for-peer education from two different perspectives of the actors involved in the tested educational scenario. Two primary actions – observing and asking – guided the research process to investigate the social situation. Informal conversations, field notes and photo material complemented the data sets. The naturalistic observation in the classrooms has been primary chosen to circumvent ethical dilemmas that often occur with interviewing techniques, such as disparities in power and status between adults and children and the potential immaturity of youngsters to report their experiences in a “useful” form for research purposes (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Corbetta, 2003). The observational process enabled the researchers to immerse in the field and to describe it i.e. from the individual learners’ point of view, from the peer couple’s perspective and from the created totality of peer juniors’ (learners) and seniors’ (mentors) perception. Instead, the data collection through focus groups facilitated the identification of experiences and perceived challenges from the instructors and the registration of their suggestions for the tested learning method in a dialogic way. The information retrieved was then complemented through data collection from single interviews, in which particular points of discussion emerged in the focus groups were further elaborated.

Finally, the choice of diverse investigators who collected and analysed the compound data, was made to decrease potential biases among the researchers and to benefit from expertise, the social network, and past conducted fieldwork at the two research sites Padua and Turin.

3. Results and discussion

A thematic analysis was carried out in order to identify the underlying issues in the set of data collected, exploring their significant relationships. The emerging themes are presented below, starting from the transcripts of the words said by students and teachers as well as from the observation notes written by the researchers. Therefore, it was not a question of adhering to

a vision of naive realism where the researcher can simply “give a voice” to the subjects he observes and interviews, but rather we proceeded to cut out pieces of selected narrative evidence, to identify “thematizing meanings” (Holloway & Todres, 2003) useful to further develop and corroborate the interpretation of theories that seek to investigate the phenomena studied.

In order to bring out the reflections on the peer-to-peer and peer-for-peer practices carried out within the KIDS4ALLL project, the narratives offered by students and teachers were necessarily purified by observations, sometimes very interesting, but however not relevant. The selected material finally taken into consideration shows considerable richness and heterogeneity, bringing out crucial themes of the model for active learning.

In particular, the thematic aggregation process has highlighted five main issues described below.

3.1 Peer education as a system practice?

The observations carried out show that the activities carried out in pairs, trios, or mini-groups in the classes participating in the KIDS4ALLL project did not constitute a factor of novelty. Teachers have been operating in this way for some time for specific tasks and activities (for all laboratory-type activities, for creative activities, and for activities for which a division of tasks between class members was required), with reportedly favourable outcomes in relation to the quality of the accomplished tasks, the learning process, and ultimately, the cultivation of social and emotional skills.

Teachers therefore largely agree on the usefulness of this method:

“These activities are a good stimulus for difficult classes, that is, those who have relational problems, tensions, conflicts. These projects have a maieutic function; in other situations, the most fragile remained in the shadows; instead here, the methodology was the trigger to build courage” (interview, teacher, lower secondary school, Turin).

However, as per the findings from focus groups and teacher interviews, it cannot encompass the entirety of the educational approach but can be complementary to conventional interventions.

“These are methods that have already been used and of which the school has long experience [...] The method was useful for giving other ideas; for large and tiring classes it really served to pass on social and emotional skills and the working method. So, it depends on what you are applying the buddy method for: if you use it to pass content or if you use it to acquire a working method or both. However, no single method replaces pure and simple study, and it is preparatory” (focus group, teacher, lower secondary school, Padua)

The interviews and discussions with teachers, managers and stakeholders have brought out further ambivalence connected to peer education.

Among teachers there is a shared opinion that cooperative work can be mainly implemented in the hours of the humanities or creative disciplines and much less during the technical-scientific teachings (with the exception of the laboratory activities, which takes place in some high schools).

“But not everyone adopts these methods; that is, there are also disciplines, and I’m not sure if it’s true or an excuse, but the fact is that there are disciplines that spontaneously adopt less conventional methods. I teach Italian, History, Civic Education and for me it’s normal; but when we are in the Council and we try to say something to those who do Mathematics or Physics, things get complicated; it seems that it is a debasement of the subject” (interview with teacher, upper secondary school, Padua)

From these observations, it becomes evident that students in the educational setting are intermittently exposed to peer learning endeavours. An invisible dividing line emerges between teachers and their preparation and disposition with respect to the teaching methods to be followed. The caesura between teachers who are mostly dedicated to traditional teaching and teachers who instead experiment with innovative forms of teaching has repercussions on both students and the teaching community. As far as students are concerned, not only will they have limited access and reduced exposure to more engaging and active didactics, but they could adopt the idea that this type of didactics is concretely applicable only to some disciplinary contexts, thus fuelling the division between Humanities and STEM which then feeds a cascade of stereotypes and prejudices, from which subsequent educational and professional choices can also derive. As far as teachers are concerned, they will not only be polarized between those who implement these methods and those who exclude them, but they will also be differently equipped from the point of view of professional knowledge and will therefore unknowingly build communities of practice strongly segregated from each other.

Added to this is a strongly-felt reflection on behalf of teachers and managers regarding the continuity of educational interventions: the main cause of ineffectiveness of innovative teaching activities and practices derives precisely from the fact that they are frequently implemented in a non-systematic way. The lack of structuring and continuity of the educational proposal – between disciplinary fields, cycles, and supply chains – does not allow students the progressive consolidation of skills. This issue brings forth an additional concern, namely that of teacher preparation concerning competencies, irrespective of their specific academic domain, and promoting a reflective ability regarding the potential development of these proficiencies rooted in their respective disciplinary field.

During the focus groups, it was the stakeholders belonging to USR (Regional Bureau of Education) in particular who raised an extremely relevant issue: training and professional updating are lacking, and teachers find themselves without adequate tools to face the new challenges of teaching.

“It is difficult to imagine quality and constant training covering these aspects; there is enormous resistance, there are those who do not really need to because they are constantly updated on their own. Then there are local challenges. Not everywhere is the same [...] The reality is that numerous educators within the school system appear to lack an understanding that their approach to education became fixed three decades ago, a time when students and the job market were vastly dissimilar entities” (focus group, stakeholder of Regional Bureau of Education, Padua)

The school is depicted as permeated by a fundamental inertia that proves challenging to overcome. This is compounded by the absence of distinct directives from the Ministry’s end, or the existence of directives and commendable guidelines which, unfortunately, lack the requisite resources for effective implementation.

“Educational policies for now are not taking charge of these aspects; everything is left to the individual initiative of teachers and schools, which are organizationally very complex and often resistant to change, if they do not come from precise ministerial directives” (Focus group, principal, Padua)

“There would be a need for more training for teachers, also to innovate their way of teaching which is mostly static and repetitive, while students change quickly; but the support from the institutions is scarce and the schools alone have neither the resources nor the time to take on this too” (interview, teacher, upper secondary school, Turin)

The challenging scenarios, stemming from factors such as ethnic diversity, situations of vulnerability, pockets of cultural and economic deprivation, and notably, actual instances of misconduct among both youth and adults, combined with the dwindling motivation among teachers, fuel a detrimental cycle. This cycle often renders schools incapable of meeting even the basic standards outlined in curricula, let alone being powerless in the face of more demanding educational mandates or objectives.

Hence, non-traditional educational methods lack the chance to truly become systemic interventions and to spread across schools in a positive feedback loop. Instead, they remain isolated and confined, primarily associated with the efforts of forward-thinking educators and administrators, along with a vibrant and engaged network of associations.

3.2 Better alone or in buddy pairs?

Evident in the observation sessions, irrespective of the students' age and the academic discipline, is a recurring challenge linked to the formation of buddy pairs, as stipulated by the project's implementation.

"The composition of the pairs is particularly critical for teachers; difficulties are encountered both related to the harmonization of the characteristics of the individuals and related to their opposition once they are formed, as they do not conform to their expectations" (journal of ethnographic notes, lower secondary school, Padua)

"In my experience couples don't always work, it's difficult to balance skills and character aspects; working in three or more also forces them to manage group situations, it's not bad" (interview, educator, upper secondary school, Turin)

Based on the teachers' remarks, it appears evident that they perceive pairs as an advantageous set-up, as it enables participants to cultivate a sense of trust and foster their capacity to mediate and negotiate with their peers.

"I prefer pairs because at least everyone works and is equally involved; pair work is very effective because it empowers each participant, both when they are homogeneous and heterogeneous. If they are both struggling it is a motivation, if they are heterogeneous, the good one supports the less good one. This approach also aids in minimizing confusion while nurturing concentration and sustained attention" (focus group, teacher, upper secondary school, Padua)

At the same time, however, the construction of buddy pairs seems to be a challenge: teachers argue that the pair is extremely fragile, existing only on the condition that its members are always present and equally willing to work on the task and manage to minimize conflict. As a result, teachers sometimes chose small groups (consisting of three or four students) as the most appropriate formula for fielding peer education: if one of the aims of peer education is inclusion, teachers believe that it is most easily accomplished in small groups in which abilities, weaknesses, resources and constraints are balanced. Classroom observations also show a tendency among the students themselves to expand the buddy pairs by adding other participants.

"Pairs continues to be a problem, so the teacher opted for a micro group composition of three or four students; it was the only viable solution since the pairs did not appear to be able to do anything. There are, however, many difficulties coordinating trios and mini-groups at least in the initial stages if there is no clear division of labour and the assumption of a leadership role by someone" (journal of ethnographic notes, lower secondary school, Padua)

"Two pairs, of their own volition, without asking the teacher, joined together to form a quartet" (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school, Turin)

The ability to adapt and successfully complete the task, even in the face of unforeseen challenges, was found to be more effectively demonstrated when small groups rather than pairs took on the role of teachers. This phenomenon was noted during the peer-for-peer phase. When transmitting content to peers, the group exhibited higher effectiveness due to the increased access to personal resources. Among these resources, several were observed, including improvisation, the use of a register intertwined with amusing anecdotes, and the deployment of curiosity-inducing tactics that incorporated digital resources, smartphones, and other materials accessible within the classroom.

The formation of small groups solves some critical issues related to the buddy pair system but raises others. Teachers note that groups tend to be more dispersive and less effective when it comes to the task; in fact, they require coordination and the identification (often implicitly) of a leader. Furthermore, groups might exhibit a higher inclination toward conflict and a greater likelihood of reaching a stalemate when composed of a balanced number of students holding opposing positions.

3.3 But who are peers?

The challenges of providing a clear-cut definition for peer education are mirrored and compounded by the comparable difficulty in precisely defining the identity of peers and the essence of being considered a peer. Indeed, belonging to the same age group – an unambiguous and easily controlled criterion – conceals considerable inter-individual diversity that makes peer-ness a random factor. Since peer-ness constitutes a focal point of the method, its description assumes particular relevance in the analysis of the activities carried out within KIDS4ALLL.

In Shiner's view in this regard (1999), explicit consideration should be given to (i) what is considered to constitute "peer-ness"; (ii) the purposes of the intervention and the manner in which it is intended to operate; and (iii) the nature of "peer involvement" in the intervention.

Regarding the first point, we note that, for the implementation of the KIDS4ALLL project, the research team provided the following instructions to teachers for the formation of buddy pairs: the pair or mini-group was to be composed in a complementary manner; yields, abilities, character traits and the presence of any difficulty factors were to be balanced in the overall profile of the members. Consequently, the concept of parity, signifying the same age and membership within the same class group, has been supplemented by diversity in additional attributes, aligning the criteria for forming pairs more closely with the model of interdependent capabilities (Cohen et al., 1999; Karataş et al., 2023).

With respect to the second point, i.e., the purpose and mode of the intervention, it should be noted that KIDS4ALLL took on two modes, peer learning (peer-to-peer) and peer teaching (peer-for-peer). At the cooperative learning stage, it should be noted that effective cooperation was not always realized in the buddy pairs. This can be read in the diary of observations of an upper secondary school:

“Some pairs talk and confront each other, but there are always pairs in which, at alternate times, one member works and the other engages in various activities not related to the task” (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school, Turin)

“The pairs have calm exchanges on the topic, but 4 pairs are also observed working individually: within these groups, the students individually jot down notes on a designated topic, avoiding direct interaction with their peers” (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school, Turin)

The peer-teaching phase was interpreted very freely. A free interpretation emerges from the diary of observations compiled by both peer-teachers – who instead of conveying learned content, shared their personal experiences and impressions (“it was an interesting project”; “it engaged us for many hours”) – and the peer-learners, who, given the opportunity to meet students of a higher school level, asked them for specific information: “are the middle school teachers good?”; “do you have a lot of homework?”.

Finally, with respect to the nature of peer involvement: the variety of possible applications of peer education highlights how peer-workers can in fact fill very different and variously defined roles-as peer learners, peer teachers, peer counsellors, and peer tutors. Milburn (1995) notes that these roles are not mutually exclusive and that a student, within the same project, may play different roles depending on the phases and circumstances. For this reason, he recommends that in an educational program, this should not only be well spelled out, but also emphasised. KIDS4ALLL highlights this aspect in its design by emphasising how peers can assume roles of learner, creator, and user (Sondergard, 2009; Ladyshefsky, 2012).

To the question “are peer educators really peers?” formulated in rhetorical terms by Badura Brack and colleagues (2008), the answer, as far as the KIDS4ALLL project is concerned, could be no, if we consider emphasising the role of teacher assigned to senior peers in the final phase of the project and especially if we emphasise the observations that indicate, as is to be expected, a partial or incomplete peerness depending on the level of involvement or interest of the individual student. Conversely, an affirmative response might be plausible if we embrace a comprehensive definition of being peers that goes beyond distinct individual attributes and roles, encompassing all young individuals engaged in the same endeavour within the same environment. This perspective regards peers as those who collec-

tively partake in a shared experience. Paradoxically, it would be diversity that would give substance to and enrich peerness: KIDS4ALLL envisaged that peers with different origins and backgrounds, born in the same country or in different contexts could thus be paired to learning buddies and guided towards inclusive peer learning processes. Educational activities would be enriched as they are socialised to different worldviews and as they would have the opportunity to create truly intercultural experiences.

3.4 Teachers for a day

The shift from peer learning (peer-to-peer) to peer teaching (peer-for-peer) entails a greater sense of agency and involvement. Students after learning content and transmission skills of the same, and after creating learning products become teachers in turn and are confronted with “inexperienced peers”, i.e., students who have not participated in the project and who attend a lower grade level.

The peer-for-peer experience is based on the key concept of proximity between the teacher and the learner. Despite the difficulty in defining peerness (see section 3.3), it is assumed that the children who take on the role of teachers are nevertheless close to junior peers because of their younger age, and a shared experiential, emotional, value and ritual heritage.

This juxtaposition of evidence within a peer-based educational relationship seems to diverge considerably from the traditional teacher-student model. The juniors, as they transmit content and methodologies to their less experienced peers, appear to markedly deviate from the conventional classroom and teaching approach adopted by their teachers. Notably, this departure entails a notable reduction in the evaluative aspects, which are characteristic of the teacher’s role.

“One notices a completely different “teaching style” than that of the teachers, informal, able to immediately arouse interest in the younger/inexperienced ones. Aspects such as differences in gender, ethnic origin, etc. are never evoked, as they are considered irrelevant; the feeling is that the youngsters have already overcome those stereotypes” (journal of ethnographic notes, lower secondary school, Padua)

In this regard, one has to wonder whether this is a generational rift, a distance generated by roles, or a genuine critique (however implicit) of conventional instructional methods.

This issue opens to a broad reflection on the teaching and educational styles of teachers: indeed, it would be misleading to simply say that there is an unbridgeable distance between students and teachers; the teaching staff is in fact an extremely internally fractious universe, in which each teacher – due first and foremost to his or her own expertise – enacts his or her own peculiar way of being in the classroom. On the other hand, the litera-

ture confirms that there is a strong relationship between teacher style and (not only curricular) student achievement: the figure of the teacher is central (Darling-Hammond, 2000b; Kechagias, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011; Subramaniam, 2013; Hidalgo-Cabrillana & Lopez-Mayan, 2018) and all the more so when it comes to skill acquisition: “Better qualified teachers may make a difference for student learning in the classroom” (Darling-Hammond, 2000a, p. 7). What is observed in peer-for-peer does in fact highlight, however, the need for new and different communication channels between those who teach and those who learn.

Beyond these digressions, it is important to note how the challenge of taking on a new role has triggered certain skills: first of all, a widespread empowerment for the entrusted task, good organisational skills (which took shape both in the division of labour among the members of the mini-groups/trios/pairs, and in the structuring and planning of the lesson to be delivered). Particularly unexpectedly for researchers, teachers, educators and the students themselves, there was evidence of problem solving and coping skills from adverse or unexpected situations. In fact, very often inexperienced peers were shown to be unresponsive, distracted, difficult to engage, and peer teachers found themselves having to reorganise their intervention and modes of interaction during the activity itself.

“There was a lot of momentum [...] [students] showed themselves to be very autonomous, responsible, even when they were unsuccessful they didn’t give up, even if there was frustration and disappointment, there was still the momentum and effort to creatively try to retrieve new ways of communicating with younger peers; and also a lot of sense of responsibility precisely because you had to interact with the younger ones” (interview, teacher, upper secondary school, Padua).

This ability to cope with the unexpected can be read as an indicator of “defining the situation” and recognition by the senior peers of the agency of the junior peers with whom it is necessary to build a relationship which is based on rules and rituals that in many circumstances cannot be fully defined *ex ante* but can be negotiated and modulated only *in itinere*. This realization empowered the senior peers to adjust their approach, consequently earning admiration and regard from their junior counterparts. They transformed into mentors for the juniors, with enduring impacts that extended beyond the project’s duration.

3.5 Real teachers do not just disappear

Finally, we show that on numerous occasions the role of teachers remained prevalent even during collaborative education activities (whether peer-to-peer or peer-for-peer). Teachers, expected to assume the roles of mediators, facilitators, and coordinators of student activities and resources,

at times exhibited challenges in relinquishing their traditional authoritative stance. In this regard, we can refer to some notes from the observation diary during cooperative learning activities. The researcher notes:

“The teacher’s style is marked by efficiency and keeping the class active and attentive, controlling its liveliness. The significant role of the teacher is highlighted in structuring the delivery of interventions during group discussions and when prompting stimulating questions. [...]. There is no emphasis on the buddy work mode, which is quite frequently disregarded” (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school, Turin)

The same group, again observed in the performance of a cooperative activity on another day and under the supervision of another teacher, stated:

“The teacher [science teacher] announces the topic of the activity which is: “Carbon Footprint” and introduces the topic by referring to topics from her recent lessons. She lists products/activities that contain/produce carbon and answers students’ questions. She questions the students with regard to the activities that most produce carbon dioxide. The lecturer does not provide directions for carrying out the activity, since the students have already done many Learning Units. The teacher provides theoretical explanations on the topic and maintains more the role of a teacher than a facilitator” (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school, Turin)

The observations imply that often teachers have interpreted the role of moderator/facilitator as merely being “more accommodating” and “less intrusive”. When it comes to cultivating the prosocial skills that underlie cooperative learning, there appears to be a deficiency.

The role of facilitators was more adequately fulfilled when educators rather than teachers supported the KIDS4ALL activities. By virtue of their specific training and professional assignment, and by virtue of the fact that they did not have to divest themselves of a known role to take on a new one, they demonstrated greater aptitude for mediation, and conflict management skills. The involvement of educators was immensely valuable, serving not only as facilitators of the learning journey but also as adept managers of emotions and interpersonal dynamics. This distinction was clearly observed by the students, who gained insight from it when they encountered similar situations during their peer-for-peer activities.

“The attitude of the educators has always been one of encouragement and support for the work of the students [...] They have always taken on a facilitator role, without ever intervening in a directive way in the process of learning and creativity” (journal of ethnographic notes, lower secondary school, Padua)

“The educator provides support, is present on request but leaves ample room for manoeuvre for the students; when faced with their questions or requests, she does not provide answers but encourages further peer discussion, reassures, corrects, but does so in a non-intrusive manner and this improves the students’ self-esteem and their critical sense” (journal of ethnographic notes, upper secondary school Turin)

“The senior peers were mostly inspired by the style of the educators, very little by that of their teachers” (journal of ethnographic notes, lower secondary school, Padua)

Conclusions

Peer education is based on rethinking the educational relationship, whereby students become social actors within their own learning context, and also take an active role *vis-à-vis* other peers: this means changing the meaning of learning (who learns and how) and of teaching (who teaches and to whom).

The results of this survey underline the effects of a close connection and synergy between curricular (disciplinary skills) and extra-curricular (social-emotional skills) components: learning through new methodologies, drawing on multidisciplinary repertoires and, above all, viewing the student as able, competent and able to participate constitute an effective way of responding to the new challenges of current educational contexts. As pointed out from the collected data, peer education — although practised with little continuity as a complementary educational and training tool, especially in the humanities — possesses inherent procedural strength in revitalising an educational institution that frequently contends with entrenched structural inertia. This force activated by peer education is in fact not only a cognitive process but also a formative and educational one and thus ultimately projective along an ideal line of development that begins with childhood and projects into adulthood.

The data indicated that a heightened sense of agency is triggered in a distinct manner during the shift from peer learning to peer teaching. Taking on a typically adult role (that of teacher) activates resources and skills in adolescents who, however, in some cases seem to distance themselves from the model of their own teachers: this element is of particular interest as it underlines the gap, not only generational, between teachers and students, but perhaps also takes an implicitly critical look at the actions of one’s teachers, in particular with regard to teaching methods, the style adopted in the classroom, and the ability to interact and motivate one’s students. However, these elements, made known by innumerable researchers, are not the subject of specific interventions by educational policies. Learning — whether

it is curricular or related to other skills – is played out through cumulative logics; it settles down slowly and is strengthened only if continuously nourished and strengthened with continuity, both by the students and by their teachers. And it is here that the most critical point emerges: not only are there currently no systemic interventions for the development of knowledge and skills in an interdependent manner, but nor are there any prospects in this regard for equipping teachers with new resources appropriate to the students' audience; a lack of genuine educational continuity, often replaced by a simple transition to the next cycle or class without ensuring that the accomplishments are made, or sometimes only partially realized, have the opportunity and means to become firmly established.

On the other hand, the results of this study suggest that considering peer education as the solution to all the critical issues of school is illusory: the concept itself is extremely articulated and flexible. If not adequately supervised, work in pairs, trios and groups, with variable structure or stability over time, can result in more striking failures than traditional teaching. The overall assessment of the results of this method, despite the extensive supporting literature, is not devoid of biases. This is due to the array of intervention types and the challenge of isolating oneself from the concurrent effects of other methodologies – especially those of conventional teaching methods, commonly employed in school education – when attempting the essential evaluation of the application circumstances.

Acknowledgments

The article is the result of the authors' shared work. Specifically Cavalletto wrote the Introduction and paragraphs number 3.1, 3.2, 3.3. Visentin wrote paragraph number 1. Schroot wrote paragraph 2. Cornali wrote the Conclusion and paragraphs 3.3, 3.5.

References

- Badura Brack, A., Millard, M. & Shah, K. (2008). Are peer educators really peers? *Journal of American College Health*, 56(5), 566-568.
- Baloche, L. & Brody, C. M. (2017). Cooperative learning: exploring challenges, crafting innovations. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 43(3), 274-283.
- Barnard, M. & McKeganey, N. (1996). Prostitution and peer education: beyond HIV. In Rhodes, T. & Hartnoll, R. (Eds.), *AIDS, drugs and prevention* (pp.103-118). London: Routledge.
- Becker, C. (2012). Education for democratic citizenship (EDC) cooperative learning for developing social skills in a democratic classroom, from https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/education/pestalozzi/Source/Documentation/TU/TU_EDC_Becker_EN.pdf.

- Belmonte, A., Bove, V., D'Inverno, G. & Modica, M. (2017). School infrastructure spending and educational outcomes in Northern Italy. SPRU Working Paper Series 2017-20, SPRU - Science Policy Research Unit, University of Sussex, Business School.
- Biesta, G. (2006). What's the point of lifelong learning if lifelong learning has no point? On the democratic deficit of policies for lifelong learning. *European Educational Research Journal*, 5(3-4), 169-180.
- Bottomley, T., Smith, M. & Wibberley, C. (1995). Peer education among crack users: not so cracked. *Druglink*, May/June, 9-12.
- Briggs, S. (2013). The perils of standardized testing: 6 ways it harms learning. Retrieved 8 September 2021, from <https://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/features/the-perils-of-standardized-testing/>.
- Cohen, E. G., Lotan, R. A., Scarloss, B. A. & Arellano, A. R. (1999). Complex instruction: Equity in cooperative learning classrooms. *Theory into Practice*, 38(2), 80-86.
- Cohen, E. & Lotan, R. (2014). *Designing groupwork: Strategies for the heterogeneous classroom*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Comoglio, M. & Cardoso, M. (1996). *Insegnare e apprendere in gruppo*. Roma: Las.
- Corbetta, P. (2003). *Social research: Theory, methods and techniques*. New York: SAGE.
- Council of the European Union (2018). Council Recommendation of 22 May 2018 on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning (2018/C 189/01).
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2000a). How teacher education matters. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 51(3), 166-173.
- Darling-Hammond L. (2000b). Teacher quality and student achievement: A review of state policy evidence. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8(1). Available at: <https://epaa.asu.edu/index.php/epaa/article/view/392/2484>.
- Diac, G. & Grădinariu, T. (2023). Successful bullying prevention: A curriculum based on cooperative learning-theoretical analysis. *Revista Romaneasca pentru Educatie Multidimensionala*, 15(1), 657-670.
- Gillies, R. (2015). Developments in Collaborative Learning. In R. Gillies (Ed.), *Collaborative learning: Developments in research and practice*, (pp. 3-15). New York: Nova.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (3rd ed.). London/ New York: Routledge.
- Hattie, J. (2015). *What works best in education: the politics of collaborative expertise*. London: Pearson.
- Hidalgo-Cabrillana, A., & Lopez-Mayan, C. (2018). Teaching styles and achievement: Student and teacher perspectives. *Economics of Education Review*, 67, 184-206.
- Holloway, I. & Todres, L. (2003). The status of method: flexibility, consistency and coherence. *Qualitative Research*, 3, 345-357.
- ISTAT (2022). Popolazione residente e dinamica demografica, <https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/278826>.
- James, A. & Prout, A. (1990). *Constructing and reconstructing childhood: New directions in the sociological study of childhood*. Oxford: Routledge.
- John, A. & Bates, S. (2024). Barriers and facilitators: The contrasting roles of media and technology in social-emotional learning. *Social and Emotional Learning: Research, Practice, and Policy*, 3, 1-9.
- Johnson, D. W., & Johnson, R. T. (1975). *Learning together and alone*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (2013). The impact of cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning environments on achievement. In J. Hattie & E. Anderman (Eds.), *International handbook of student achievement* (372-374). New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (2016). Cooperative learning and teaching citizenship in democracies. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 76, 162-177.
- Karataş, S., Eckstein, K., Noack, P., Rubini, M. & Crocetti, E. (2023). Meeting in school: Cultural diversity approaches of teachers and intergroup contact among ethnic minority and majority adolescents. *Child Development*, 94(1), 237-253.
- Kechagias, K. (Ed.). (2011). *Teaching and assessing soft skills*. Thessaloniki: 1st Second Chance School of Thessaloniki.
- Ladyshevsky, R. K. (2012). The role of peers in feedback processes. In D. Boud & E. Molloy (Eds.), *Feedback in higher and professional education* (pp. 174-189). London: Routledge.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lave, J. (2009). The practice of learning. In Ellers K. (Ed.) *Contemporary theories of learning* (pp. 200-208). London: Routledge.
- Milburn, K. (1995). A critical review of peer education with young people with special reference to sexual health. *Health Education Research*, 10(4), 407-420.
- Morrow, V. & Richards, M. (1996). The ethics of social research with children: An overview. *Children & Society*, 10(2), 90-105.
- National Education Association (2011). *Preparing 21st century students for a global society: An educator's guide to the "Four Cs"*. National Education Association; Alexandria.
- OECD (2015). *Skills for social progress: The power of social and emotional skills*. Paris: OECD Publishing, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264226159-en>.
- Roorda, D. L., Koomen, H. M., Spilt, J. L. & Oort, F. J. (2011). The influence of affective teacher-student relationships on students' school engagement and achievement: A analytic approach. *Review of Educational Research*, 81, 493-529.
- Sharan, S., Kussell, R., Hertz-Lazarowitz, R., Bejarano, Y., Raviv, S. & Sharan, Y. (1984). *Cooperative learning in the classroom. Research in desegregated schools*. Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum.
- Shiner, M. (1999). Defining peer education. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22(4), 555-566.
- Slavin, R. E. (1980). Cooperative learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 50(2), 315-342.
- Slavin, R. E. (1986). *Using student team learning*. Center for Research on Elementary and Middle Schools. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University.
- Slavin, R. E. (1987). Cooperative learning and cooperative school. *Educational Leadership*, 45, 7-13.
- Sondergaard, H. (2009). Learning from and with peers: the different roles of student peer reviewing. In *Proceedings of the 14th annual ACM SIGCSE conference on Innovation and technology in computer science education (ITiCSE '09)*. Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, USA, 31-35. <https://doi.org/10.1145/1562877.1562893>
- Subramaniam, I. (2013). Teachers perception on their readiness in integrating soft skills in the teaching and learning. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 2, 19-29.
- Thurmond, V. A. (2001). The point of triangulation. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 33(3), 253-258.
- Van Ryzin, M. J., Cil, G. & Roseth, C. J. (2023). Costs and benefits of cooperative learning as a universal school-based approach to adolescent substance use prevention. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 51(1), 438-452.
- Ware, L. (2004). *Ideology and the politics of (in)exclusion*. New York: Peter Lang.