

# Nurturing Peace Through Peer Reading: Tales of Struggling Readers and Peer Tutors

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored how peer reading fosters a culture of peace in educational settings by examining the experiences of struggling readers and their peer mentors, using Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and Constructivist learning theory as a framework. Participants included two groups—struggling readers and peer tutors—selected through convenience sampling. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Three key themes emerged. First, Safe Space Nurtures Relationship emphasized how reading sessions created trusting environments, enabling emotional sharing and fostering mutual respect. Second, Collaboration: Learning from One Another revealed that peer interactions enhanced students' confidence, inclusion, and participation, especially for struggling readers. Third, Peer Reading: A Life Changing Experience illustrated how tutors developed leadership and responsibility, with positive impacts extending beyond the classroom. This ripple effect highlights how peer reading cultivates traits essential to peacebuilding, including empathy, service, and mentorship. The study concludes that peer reading not only supports academic development but also embeds peace education values into daily student interactions through collaborative learning, contributing to a peaceful school culture.

**Keywords:** Peer Reading, Culture of Peace, Struggling Readers, Peer Mentors, Qualitative Research

## INTRODUCTION

Literacy remains a foundational yet challenging area for many students, particularly for struggling readers who often face low confidence, poor academic performance, and social exclusion. Traditional remediation approaches frequently isolate these learners rather than empower them. At the same time, incidents of school-based conflict, bullying, and lack of social cohesion are rising, highlighting the need to integrate peacebuilding strategies into educational practice. There is a critical need for pedagogical approaches that simultaneously address academic and socio-emotional development.

Peer reading—where students read together, support each other's learning, and share interpretations—has emerged as a promising approach. Studies show that peer reading enhances reading comprehension, motivation, and confidence, especially for struggling readers (Lee, Cho, Park & Choi, 2021). Sanches-Ferreira et al. (2022) found that online peer tutoring not only improved reading fluency and accuracy but also encouraged positive peer interactions. Rahmasari (2017) highlighted that peer tutoring improves comprehension while fostering a sense of responsibility and collaboration.

Additionally, peace education has been increasingly emphasized as a means of cultivating empathy, cooperation, and conflict resolution in schools (Yastibas, 2021). Castor and Galace (2010) propose that peace education develops essential knowledge, skills, and values to foster a culture of peace. Yusuf (2011)

found that integrating peace education into reading instruction enhances students' awareness of peace-related issues. Innovations such as digital storytelling and critical reading have also been explored as tools for peacebuilding (Irgin, 2023).

Despite the existing literature on peer tutoring, reading development, and peace education, there is limited empirical research that specifically explores the role of peer reading in promoting peace and inclusion among struggling readers. Most studies focus on academic outcomes, with insufficient attention paid to the social-emotional dimensions of peer interaction. Challenges also persist in assessing the broader impacts of peacebuilding interventions in educational contexts (Brusset et al., 2022).

This study responded to this research gap by investigating the experiences of struggling readers and their peer tutors in a peer reading program. It explored how peer reading served as an intervention for peacebuilding. The findings aimed to inform educators, policymakers, and school leaders on how to implement integrated strategies that support struggling learners academically and socially. The study aligns with national efforts, such as the Philippine Department of Education's MATATAG Agenda and the National Learning Recovery Program, which emphasize peace education and values integration (DepEd Order No. 013, 2023).

### **Research Question**

This study aimed to explore how peer reading fosters a culture of peace in educational settings by examining the experiences of struggling readers and their peer tutors. Specifically, it sought to answer the research question:

1. How can peer reading as a pedagogical approach contribute to nurturing a culture of peace in the school environment?

### **Vygotsky's Social Development Theory**

Rooted in Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, peer reading draws on the principle that learning is most effective through social interactions, especially when tasks are slightly beyond the learner's current ability and supported by a more knowledgeable peer. This aligns with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where peer scaffolding facilitates deeper cognitive engagement and literacy growth.

### **Constructivist Learning Theory**

Constructivist theory emphasizes that learners actively build knowledge through real-life experiences. In the context of peer reading, students are not passive receivers of information; instead, they engage with each other to construct meaning from texts. This collaborative learning process encourages the development of empathy, respect, and cooperation—core values necessary for peacebuilding in educational environments.

Together, these theories form the basis for understanding how peer reading can serve as a strategy that promotes both literacy and a culture of peace in schools.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cultivating a Culture of Peace in School**

Mahatma Gandhi's profound assertion, "There is no way to peace. Peace is the way.", encapsulates the essence of peace education and its transformative potential within formal schooling. Peace education seeks to cultivate a culture of nonviolence, cooperation, and respect for human dignity. It emphasizes awareness of human rights and promotes constructive values and behaviors that support social cohesion and global citizenship (UNESCO, 2013). Jabor (2024) affirms that peacemaking is inherent in the educational process, emphasizing that education should actively promote harmonious interactions and mutual

understanding. Khumalo (2019) reinforces this by highlighting the role of schools in equipping learners with conflict-resolution skills and values essential for peaceful coexistence. Moreover, Pinzon-Salcedo (2018) argues that peace education fosters personal and societal transformation by challenging traditional educational models and addressing the root causes of violence, thereby contributing to a more equitable and just society.

Empirical evidence further supports the value of peace education as a viable alternative to punitive interventions. Jhon (2018) demonstrates that programs rooted in peace education can be more effective in fostering long-term behavioral change compared to traditional security measures or disciplinary policies. Such approaches align with broader global efforts, as advocated by UNESCO (2013), to integrate peace-oriented curricula that instill empathy, tolerance, and mutual respect among learners.

However, despite these positive potentials, the implementation of peace education faces significant challenges. Akbar (2021) highlights the practical difficulties encountered by English language teachers in incorporating peace-related themes into reading comprehension lessons, indicating a gap between policy and practice. Additionally, school violence continues to be a pervasive problem. Harber (2018) and Hochfeld (2022) document the rising levels of intolerance, disrespect, and aggression in educational settings. These issues persist despite the existence of interventions such as Life Orientation and Safe School programs. Sitoyi (2020) and Dube (2018) critically question the effectiveness of these initiatives, pointing to the lack of substantial change in school environments. This ongoing violence underscores the urgent need for more robust, integrated, and context-sensitive peace education programs at all levels of schooling, particularly at the foundational stage.

### **The Promise and Pitfalls of Peer Reading**

Peer reading is a collaborative learning strategy in which students read together in pairs or small groups, taking turns as readers and listeners. This approach has gained considerable recognition for its effectiveness in enhancing reading fluency, comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation (Topping, 2005). As a form of peer-assisted learning, peer reading involves structured interactions that promote literacy development while simultaneously strengthening interpersonal relationships and communication skills among students.

Research indicates that peer reading supports both cognitive and social-emotional development. Students involved in peer reading often engage in reciprocal teaching, gain self-confidence, and develop a sense of responsibility by supporting their peers (Fuchs & Fuchs, 2005). Furthermore, peer reading environments have been found to reduce reading anxiety and foster a sense of comfort and safety, especially for struggling readers (Rasinski, 2010). This creates a positive atmosphere that encourages students to take academic risks, ask questions, and become more actively engaged in reading activities.

Several studies provide evidence supporting the effectiveness of peer reading in enhancing reading comprehension. For instance, Peniosan and Pascual (2019) found that peer reading interventions significantly improved the reading comprehension skills of Grade III pupils, demonstrating the value of peer collaboration in literacy instruction. Similarly, Piator and Villocino (2024) investigated the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) among Grade 5 students and reported significant gains in reading comprehension, further validating the role of structured peer support in reading development.

Peer tutoring, a closely related practice, also has a rich history in educational settings and continues to demonstrate positive academic outcomes. Recent studies, such as Robinson (2022), affirm that peer tutoring programs can greatly enhance reading comprehension, fluency, and motivation among struggling readers. When implemented with appropriate training and support, peer tutoring fosters the development

of metacognitive strategies like summarizing and self-questioning—skills essential for reading success (Mathes & Fuchs, 1994).

Moreover, peer tutoring is particularly beneficial for students with learning disabilities. Hsieh et al. (2017) as cited in Gubalani et al. (2023) emphasize the importance of providing tutors with specialized training to support diverse learners, including the use of visual aids, simplified explanations, and regular comprehension checks. With continuous teacher supervision, peer tutoring can become a powerful, inclusive tool for enhancing literacy across different learner profiles. For example, Gubalani et al. (2023) found that ninth-grade students involved in structured peer tutoring programs showed marked improvements in reading comprehension, reinforcing the broader evidence base supporting peer-assisted strategies in literacy education.

Despite these numerous benefits, the effectiveness of peer reading and tutoring depends heavily on several critical factors. Research by Topping and Lindsay (2020) as cited in Gubalani et al. (2023) underscores that successful outcomes are only achieved when essential conditions are met. These include adequate training and supervision for tutors, clearly defined goals, and a supportive learning environment. Without these, peer tutoring may yield unintended negative outcomes. For example, poorly trained tutors can inadvertently reinforce misconceptions, provide incorrect information, or hinder rather than help the learning process.

### **Peer Reading as a Catalyst for Peacebuilding in School Community**

Integrating peer reading into educational practice serves a dual purpose: enhancing literacy and promoting a culture of peace within school communities. Several researches underscore the transformative potential of peer reading as a collaborative learning approach that fosters empathy, reduces bullying, and builds a supportive educational environment.

Jumuad et al. (2023) demonstrated that peer tutoring—a structured form of peer reading—significantly improved reading comprehension among young learners, underscoring its cognitive benefits. Beyond academic gains, peer reading cultivates socio-emotional development by encouraging mutual engagement and interpersonal support among students. These interpersonal dynamics are integral to building peaceful school cultures grounded in mutual respect, empathy, and collaboration.

The relevance of peer reading is particularly pronounced among marginalized groups. Thomason and Ward (2024) highlighted how peer tutoring empowered bilingual students with interrupted formal education, enhancing their literacy while fostering a sense of belonging and community—two pillars of peaceful coexistence. These findings align with broader frameworks of peace education, which aim to instill values of tolerance, empathy, and non-violence through both curricular and extracurricular initiatives (Bhat & Jamatia, 2022).

The role of peace education in schools has gained increasing recognition as educators and policymakers identify the importance of equipping students with essential life skills for peaceful coexistence. Reading itself—particularly when facilitated through peer-assisted methods—has been shown to play a key role in fostering socio-psychological competencies. Yiğit and Durukan (2023) assert that reading cultivates empathy, critical thinking, and effective communication—skills that are vital for resolving conflicts, developing mutual understanding, and maintaining harmonious relationships. Through peer reading, literacy instruction becomes a communal activity that reinforces social cohesion and emotional intelligence.

Peer reading interventions have also been shown to support vulnerable student populations. Moeyaert et al. (2021) and Fox et al. (2020) reported positive social-behavioral outcomes from peer-assisted strategies,

including enhanced communication, improved play skills, and reduced behavioral issues among students with disabilities. Neitzel et al. (2021) confirmed the effectiveness of one-to-one, small-group, and whole-class peer tutoring in raising struggling readers' academic performance. Additionally, Cartwright et al. (2020) found that reading-specific executive function interventions delivered in peer settings enhanced both reading comprehension and broader cognitive skills.

Despite these strengths, peer reading is not without its limitations. Its success is heavily dependent on the quality of peer interactions, the consistency of implementation, and the training provided to tutors. Without adequate guidance and support, peer reading may inadvertently reinforce existing academic disparities, particularly if stronger readers dominate sessions or if struggling readers do not receive sufficient scaffolding. Thomason and Ward (2024) noted that while peer tutoring fosters a sense of community, it can also expose students to social anxieties or stigmatization if not carefully structured.

Moreover, the broader benefits of peace education through peer reading may be difficult to sustain without systemic support from school leadership and alignment with institutional values. As Bhat and Jamatia (2022) cautioned, peace education must be consistently reinforced across multiple school domains to yield long-term cultural change. Without this holistic integration, peer reading risks becoming an isolated practice with limited impact on the broader school climate.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study employed qualitative research design to explore how peer reading contributes to promoting a culture of peace among struggling readers and their peer tutors within a school community. A qualitative approach was chosen because it enabled an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives, experiences, and the nuances of their interactions. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), a basic qualitative design is appropriate when the aim is to understand how individuals make meaning of a particular concept, experience, or process. In this study, the focus was on how students—both struggling readers and their peer tutors—perceived and experienced peer reading as means to foster peacebuilding in their school environment.

### **Research Setting**

The study was conducted in a public high school in the Philippines that has implemented a peer reading program as part of its literacy and values education efforts. The school serves a diverse student population, including learners who have been identified as struggling readers.

### **Participants and Sampling**

The participants were selected through convenience sampling focusing on two groups, the struggling readers who were identified by their teachers as needing additional reading support, and the peer tutors who volunteered and were assigned to assist their peers through the peer reading sessions.

The sample consisted of 10 participants, 5 struggling readers and 5 peer tutors. This sample size aligns with qualitative standards, allowing for in-depth exploration while maintaining manageability for data analysis.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data were collected using the following methods:

- **Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):** Separate group discussions were held with struggling readers and peer tutors to explore their thoughts, feelings, and reflections on the peer reading experience.



- Semi-Structured Interviews: Selected participants were interviewed individually to further understand their experiences, especially the influence of peer reading on their reading skills, relationships, and attitudes toward school and others.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved:

1. Familiarizing the data gathered
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing the themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Safe Space Nurtures Relationship**

As the peer reading sessions progressed, both tutors and struggling readers began to form meaningful connections rooted in empathy and understanding. These sessions gradually evolved into safe spaces—places where students could open up about their reading difficulties without fear of judgment. For many struggling readers, it was the first time they felt seen, heard, and supported in their learning journey.

First struggling reader shared how this environment changed her perspective: “My tutor patiently helped me read and understand. She did not laugh at me when I could not read correctly. I also felt comfortable because she is friendly in dealing with me.”. This sense of comfort was echoed by another struggling reader, who found emotional relief in knowing she was not alone: “Peer reading created a space where I did not feel judged for what I did not know. It made me feel natural every time I ask questions and share my thoughts. It was comforting to know that I was not alone in my struggles, and that others were learning and growing alongside with me as well.”.

For the peer tutors, the experience was just as transformative. Initially, seeing their role as academic support, many discovered the deeper emotional needs of their partners. First peer tutor reflected: “At first, I thought I was just helping with the reading alone, but as we go along, I realized that what she really needed was somebody who would believe in her. After understanding more of her, she started to show trust in me and we became close.”. These relationships nurtured mutual respect and emotional connection, creating a peaceful, collaborative dynamic. As fifth peer tutor noted: “It helped boost my confidence in sharing my ideas because my tutee listened attentively.”.

In these safe and supportive environments, not only did the students learn to read but also learned to listen, to care, and to grow together, laying the foundation for a culture of peace in the classroom. The establishment of safe space which nurtures relationship between peer tutors and struggling readers served as a crucial element for effective constructivist learning. Struggling readers’ comfort in making mistakes without apprehension and peer tutors’ recognition of the profound need to simply believe in their tutee exemplify the secure psychological space essential for active knowledge construction. This directly supports constructivist principles, where learners require a safe environment to explore and refine their understanding through interaction. The resulting emotional closeness, fostering mutual respect and peaceful interpersonal dynamics, further underscores how a supportive social context, as emphasized by Vygotsky, facilitates both cognitive and emotional development. Significantly, this outcome aligns with Castor and Galace (2010), who propose that peace education cultivates essential knowledge, skills, and

values necessary for a culture of peace. This also resonates with Khumalo (2019)'s focus on equipping learners with skills for peaceful coexistence and Pinzon-Salcedo (2018)'s assertion that peace is fundamentally rooted in recognizing human dignity.

### **Collaboration: Learning from One Another**

Peer reading became more than just a literacy tool. It became a bridge that connected students, especially struggling readers who often felt isolated in the classroom. Through these sessions, students began to feel a stronger sense of belonging, discovering that learning was not a solitary struggle but a shared journey. Fourth struggling reader vividly recalled the fear and anxiety she felt at the beginning: “At first the reading material felt like a weight in my hands. It was very difficult for me to read; I was sweating all over. But when my peer tutor approached me with a smile, I told myself I will be okay. It was awkward at first, but as we went along, I realized that the help she gave me was genuine and without judgment. She patiently guided me through the words I struggled with.”. First struggling reader shared how the experience changed their participation in class: “I felt shy participating in class before, but now I feel confident to read when my teacher asks me.”.

The benefits were not limited to the struggling readers. Peer tutors also discovered the power of collaborative learning. Third peer tutor reflected: “It was not about who was better. We just worked together and learned from each other. We both shared good ideas.”.

For some tutors, the experience profoundly shifted their mindset. Fourth tutor admitted: “At first, I felt superior, to be honest, when I was paired with someone who struggles to read. Seeing her get frustrated—her brow furrowing, shoulders slumping—it stopped me cold. I decided to change my approach and patiently explain things. That experience completely changed my view of teamwork. It was not just about me explaining and her absorbing. It was a collaborative process, a two-way street where I learned as much as I taught. I learned empathy, the value of different learning styles, and how personal connection makes learning meaningful. It was not just about tutoring; it was about becoming a better reader and a better teammate.”. Peer reading helped remove class differences, creating an environment where all students felt included and could participate equally.

**Collaboration and learning from one another**, powerfully illustrates the socio-cultural dimension of learning. Struggling readers' transformation from classroom shyness to confident participation after receiving peer reading support directly exemplifies the power of collaborative learning. This progression highlights how social interaction with a more proficient peer, operating within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, provides the necessary scaffolding for the struggling reader to achieve tasks previously beyond their individual capacity. Peer tutors' observation that, “It was not about who was better. We just worked together and learned from each other. We both shared good ideas.” reinforces the non-hierarchical, reciprocal nature characteristic of effective peer tutoring. This dissolution of academic hierarchies, leading to a culture of inclusion where every student had a role and voice, directly supports UNESCO (2013)'s advocacy for integrating peace programs to foster constructive attitudes and behaviors, thereby addressing the violence, intolerance, and disrespect highlighted by Harber (2018) and Hochfeld (2022). These findings align with the studies of Robinson (2022) and Mathes and Fuchs (1994) on peer tutoring's role in enhancing reading comprehension and metacognitive strategies.

### **Peer Reading: A Life-Changing Experience**

For many peer tutors, the experience of participating in the reading program extended far beyond helping someone improve their literacy skills. It sparked personal growth and transformation. As they guided their peers, tutors began to develop a deeper sense of responsibility, empathy, and leadership. These qualities

soon became evident not just in reading sessions but in their wider school life.

First peer tutor reflected on how the program changed their approach to leadership: “My patience grew, and I learned to lead without shouting, which also helped me in other school projects.”.

Another peer tutor shared how the program reshaped their self-perception: “Peer reading has definitely changed the way I see myself—not just as a learner, but as someone who can also teach and uplift others. It taught me patience, empathy, and the value of starting from the basics. Outside the classroom, I have become more understanding and aware of how different our learning journeys can be. I have also learned to take initiative, adapt my approach, and truly listen. More than anything, peer reading made me realize that growth is mutual. It happens both when you learn and when you help others learn.”.

This life changing experience was felt by the struggling readers too, many of whom began to envision themselves as future mentors. Second struggling reader expressed: “She acted like a big sister. Now I want to help someone else like the way she had helped me.”.

Peer tutors also found their new skills carried over into their daily lives, as fifth peer tutor noted: “Peer reading allowed me to be more patient when teaching my fellow students and siblings things they do not understand.”.

The emergence of the theme, peer reading: a life changing experience, demonstrates the positive influence of peer reading beyond academic achievement, directly connecting it to the principles of peace education. Peer tutors' self-reported increases in confidence and a sense of responsibility, which translated into peaceful leadership and mentoring roles outside the program, align with the call for adaptive teaching methods to meet student needs, as well as Bhat and Jamatia (2022)'s perspective that peace education cultivates conflict resolution and emotional intelligence. Peer tutors' specific acquisition of “patience and the ability to lead without shouting”, coupled with struggling reader's aspiration to “help someone else like she helped me”, exemplify a ripple effect where positive social behaviors are learned and subsequently propagated. This extends beyond mere reading proficiency, fostering values of leadership, mentorship, and service—all recognized as essential components of peace education, as articulated by Hughes and Wenzel (2022) in their discussion of Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) frameworks promoting empathy and nonviolent problem-solving.

The life-changing effects of peer reading extend into students' broader lives, as evidenced by the peer tutor who applied these skills to family interactions “...more patient when teaching my fellow students and siblings...”. This supports Moeyaert et al. (2021) and Fox et al. (2020) who found that peer-assisted strategies enhance communication and social behavior even beyond academic tasks, reinforcing the potential of peer reading as a vehicle for cultivating lifelong peaceful habits and relationships.

Lastly, the theme reflects Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners grow through scaffolded interactions with more capable peers. In this context, both tutors and tutees co-construct knowledge and social-emotional competencies, illustrating that learning and personal transformation are reciprocal processes fostered through meaningful peer collaboration.

## CONCLUSION

The peer reading program proves to be a powerful tool, simultaneously boosting academic skills and embedding crucial peace education values, all in line with how students naturally build knowledge through social interaction. It starts by nurturing relationship between students, creating a safe space where they can comfortably make mistakes and receive non-judgmental support. This strong connection fosters mutual respect and peaceful interactions. Furthermore, the program significantly promotes learning



through collaboration. Students, especially those who previously felt isolated, become more engaged and participate actively, benefiting from collaborative learning that breaks down traditional classroom hierarchies. This supportive environment directly contributes to a sense of belonging and a reduction in negative behaviors. Finally, the program cultivates life changing experience. Tutors gain confidence and responsibility, translating these into positive leadership and helping roles that extend beyond the reading program itself. This creates a positive ripple effect, nurturing valuable traits like patience, empathy, and a desire to serve others—all essential for promoting peace within the school community and beyond

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