

Peer Tutoring as an Educational Intervention for Children with Intellectual Disabilities: A Conceptual Review

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ABSTRACT

Peer tutoring has emerged as an effective and evidence-informed instructional approach that promotes academic achievement, social participation, communication development, and learner engagement among students with diverse educational needs. In the context of inclusive and special education, peer tutoring represents a collaborative pedagogical practice in which students support one another through structured academic interactions facilitated by teachers. The present conceptual review examines the role of peer tutoring as an educational intervention for children with intellectual disabilities, focusing on its influence on academic involvement, adaptive behaviour, classroom participation, social competence, and self-confidence.

Drawing upon perspectives from social learning theory, constructivist learning theory, behavioural approaches, and inclusive education frameworks, this review explores the mechanisms through which peer-mediated learning contributes to meaningful educational experiences. Existing research indicates that well-designed peer tutoring interventions enhance active engagement, increase motivation, improve task performance, and facilitate individualized learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, peer tutoring promotes social inclusion by strengthening peer relationships, encouraging communication, and reducing barriers to classroom participation.

The review also examines essential components that determine the effectiveness of peer tutoring programs, including appropriate selection and preparation of peer tutors, teacher supervision, supportive classroom environments, systematic implementation, and integration within Individualized Education Programs (IEPs). Although challenges related to training, consistency, and program sustainability remain, evidence suggests that peer tutoring is a flexible, economical, and research-supported approach capable of improving educational and social outcomes.

The review concludes that peer tutoring extends beyond an instructional technique; it represents an inclusive educational practice that empowers learners with intellectual disabilities, promotes collaborative learning communities, and contributes significantly to equitable participation within educational settings.

Keywords: Peer tutoring, intellectual disability, inclusive education, peer-assisted learning, special education, collaborative learning

I. INTRODUCTION

Intellectual disability is a developmental condition involving significant limitations in intellectual functioning and adaptive behaviour that affect learning, communication, and daily living skills. According to the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, these challenges emerge during the developmental period and often impact academic performance and social participation in school settings.

Inclusive education emphasizes meaningful participation of students with disabilities alongside their peers, creating a need for instructional strategies that support both learning and social inclusion. Peer tutoring is one such effective strategy, where students provide academic or social support to one another under teacher guidance. Models of peer tutoring include same-age, cross-age, class-wide, and reciprocal tutoring.

For children with intellectual disabilities, peer tutoring improves academic engagement, communication, social interaction, confidence, and independence. It also benefits peer tutors by developing empathy, leadership, and communication skills. Research shows that peer tutoring positively influences reading, mathematics, classroom participation, and social behaviour among students with disabilities.

Despite its effectiveness, successful peer tutoring requires proper tutor selection, training, teacher supervision, and consistent implementation. Overall, peer tutoring is a valuable and inclusive educational approach that promotes both academic and social development for children with intellectual disabilities.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The effectiveness of peer tutoring for children with intellectual disabilities is supported by multiple educational and psychological theories. These perspectives explain how social interaction, modelling, reinforcement, collaboration, and inclusive participation contribute to academic learning, adaptive behaviour, and social development. Major theoretical foundations include Social Learning Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, Behavioural Learning Theory, and the Inclusive Education perspective.

Social Learning Theory

Peer tutoring is strongly grounded in the Social Learning Theory of Albert Bandura, which states that learning occurs through observation, imitation, modelling, and social interaction. In peer tutoring settings, children with intellectual disabilities learn by observing peers demonstrate academic tasks, communication skills, and appropriate classroom behaviours. Repeated observation, guided practice, and peer encouragement help improve motivation, confidence, and skill acquisition. Peer tutors serve as relatable role models, making learning more accessible than solely teacher-directed instruction.

Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist theory emphasizes that knowledge is actively constructed through interaction and meaningful experiences. The work of Lev Vygotsky is particularly relevant through the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which explains that learners achieve higher understanding with guidance from more knowledgeable individuals. In peer tutoring, tutors provide scaffolding through explanations, prompts, demonstrations, and collaborative problem-solving. This support enables children with intellectual disabilities to gradually develop independence and confidence in learning.

Behavioural Learning Theory

Behavioural Learning Theory explains peer tutoring through reinforcement, feedback, repetition, and structured instruction. In peer tutoring sessions, tutors provide immediate feedback, encouragement, and

corrective guidance that strengthen desired academic and social behaviours. For children with intellectual disabilities, repeated practice and positive reinforcement improve task engagement, persistence, and adaptive skills. The structured nature of peer tutoring also helps reduce anxiety and increases participation in classroom activities.

Inclusive Education Perspective

Peer tutoring aligns closely with the principles of inclusive education, which emphasize participation, equity, acceptance, and equal learning opportunities for all students. Peer-mediated learning encourages active classroom involvement, social interaction, and collaborative participation for students with intellectual disabilities. It also reduces social isolation by promoting friendship, cooperation, and peer acceptance, thereby creating a supportive and inclusive classroom environment.

Integration of Theoretical Perspectives

Together, these theories provide a comprehensive explanation of peer tutoring effectiveness. Social Learning Theory highlights modelling and observation, Constructivist Theory emphasizes collaboration and scaffolding, Behavioural Theory focuses on reinforcement and feedback, and Inclusive Education promotes participation and belonging. Collectively, these perspectives show that peer tutoring is a multidimensional educational intervention that supports the academic, social, emotional, and developmental needs of children with intellectual disabilities.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The growing body of research on peer tutoring demonstrates its potential as an effective intervention for improving academic achievement, social participation, communication, and adaptive functioning among students with disabilities. Existing literature indicates that peer-mediated approaches are particularly valuable within inclusive educational environments because they provide individualized assistance while simultaneously promoting meaningful peer relationships. The following review synthesizes significant empirical contributions related to peer tutoring among learners with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Douglas Fuchs and Lynn S. Fuchs (2005) examined the effectiveness of Peer-Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) among students experiencing learning difficulties. Their findings demonstrated that structured peer interactions contributed to improvements in reading fluency, word recognition, comprehension, and classroom engagement. The researchers emphasized that peer-assisted approaches increase opportunities for active participation and meaningful practice, which are essential components of effective learning, particularly for students who require additional instructional support.

Nancy K. Utley and Sherrie L. Mortweet (1997) investigated peer-mediated instruction among students with mild intellectual disabilities and reported positive effects on academic performance, particularly in mathematics achievement and task completion. Their work highlighted the importance of providing frequent opportunities for guided practice and immediate feedback. The findings suggested that peer tutoring can supplement teacher-directed instruction by creating additional learning opportunities within classroom settings.

Research by Erik W. Carter and colleagues (2016) focused on peer support arrangements for students with developmental disabilities. Their findings indicated that carefully structured peer support systems improved communication, social interaction, classroom involvement, and acceptance among students with disabilities. The study emphasized that effective peer tutoring requires intentional preparation of

peer tutors, teacher facilitation, and opportunities for authentic social engagement rather than merely academic assistance.

Debra Spencer (2006) examined cooperative learning and reciprocal peer tutoring strategies for students with special educational needs. The findings revealed improvements in reading comprehension, cooperative behaviours, confidence, and learner participation. Spencer highlighted that reciprocal peer tutoring benefits both participants because students alternate between the roles of tutor and learner, encouraging responsibility, independence, and mutual support.

A comprehensive meta-analysis conducted by Kimberly Bowman-Perrott and colleagues (2013) examined evidence from multiple peer tutoring studies involving students with disabilities. The findings indicated moderate to strong positive effects of peer tutoring on academic outcomes and social behaviours. The review demonstrated that peer tutoring is effective across different academic areas and educational levels, suggesting its versatility as an intervention strategy. The researchers further noted that outcomes were strongest when interventions were systematically planned, consistently implemented, and supported by appropriate teacher supervision.

David Kamps and colleagues (2015) explored peer-mediated interventions for students with autism and developmental disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Their research demonstrated that peer-based approaches enhanced communication, classroom engagement, social interaction, and peer relationships while reducing social isolation. These findings are particularly relevant for children with intellectual disabilities, as social participation and communication development are often significant areas of educational need.

Kahveci G. (2026) examined the academic and social effects of a peer tutoring intervention in which a twice-exceptional student with autism spectrum disorder (2e-ASD) tutored three students with learning disabilities (LDs). Using a multiple baseline design with numerous probes, the study found significant improvements in reading accuracy among the tutees and enhanced social engagement, communication, and self-confidence in the tutor. Feedback from parents and educators also indicated stronger peer relationships and greater classroom participation. The findings support peer-mediated, strength-based instructional models as an effective and inclusive approach for improving both academic and social outcomes in special education.

Howeil (2017) examined the effectiveness of a peer-tutoring program in which students with emotional behavioral disorders (EBD) served as tutors for students with moderate intellectual disabilities (ID). Using a multiple baseline across subjects design, the study aimed to increase social initiations among students with ID in self-contained classroom settings. The findings highlighted the value of peer-mediated learning in promoting social interaction, while also enhancing the tutors' self-esteem and confidence. The study supports peer tutoring as an effective strategy for improving socialization and inclusive interaction among students with disabilities.

Kavanagh (2018) examined the effects of peer tutoring on vocabulary acquisition among middle school students with disabilities in co-taught classrooms. Twelve eighth-grade students with learning disabilities, multiple disabilities, or autism participated in paired peer tutoring sessions over twelve weeks. The findings showed that nine students improved their performance on grade-level vocabulary quizzes, while the remaining students maintained stable or passing scores. The results support the effectiveness of peer tutoring as a strategy for enhancing vocabulary learning among students with disabilities in inclusive educational settings.

Peterson, M. (2025) in his research Peer mentoring in education: Academic and social outcomes for students with disabilities reviewed the academic and social outcomes of peer mentoring for students with disabilities and peer mentors. The findings showed that peer mentoring improved academic performance in areas such as reading comprehension, mathematics, and content learning, while also promoting social inclusion through reduced bullying, improved classroom behaviour, and increased student engagement. Peer mentors also benefited through enhanced leadership skills, self-esteem, empathy, and positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Although limitations such as small sample sizes and short intervention periods were noted, the study supports peer mentoring as an effective approach for fostering academic achievement, social development, and inclusive educational environments.

Shanmugham (2021) investigated that effectiveness of peer tutoring in creating a support system for children with intellectual disabilities (CWID) in inclusive school settings. Using experimental and descriptive survey designs, the study involved headmasters, teachers, peers, parents, and students with ID. Peer tutors were trained to teach mathematical concepts to CWID over 30 sessions. The findings revealed that peer tutoring significantly improved the academic achievement of children with ID and increased peer acceptance and support within the inclusive setting. The study emphasizes peer tutoring as an effective strategy for strengthening collaborative support systems involving schools, families, and peers for the holistic development of children with intellectual disabilities.

Collectively, the reviewed literature provides substantial evidence supporting peer tutoring as an effective educational intervention for children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Across studies, common outcomes include improved academic engagement, increased opportunities for practice, enhanced communication, stronger peer relationships, and improved classroom participation. These findings reinforce the view that peer tutoring addresses not only instructional needs but also broader developmental and social objectives.

However, the literature also identifies several challenges that may influence the effectiveness and sustainability of peer tutoring programs. Inadequate teacher preparation, insufficient peer tutor training, inconsistent implementation, limited monitoring, and differences in learner characteristics may reduce intervention effectiveness. Successful peer tutoring requires systematic planning, careful selection of peer tutors, explicit instruction regarding tutoring roles, and continuous teacher support.

Overall, existing research suggests that peer tutoring represents a promising evidence-based approach within special and inclusive education. When implemented with appropriate structure and professional guidance, it can contribute significantly to improving educational experiences, social inclusion, and quality of life for children with intellectual disabilities.

IV. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework of peer tutoring for children with intellectual disabilities is based on behavioural learning theory, social learning theory, constructivist perspectives, and inclusive education principles. It assumes that structured peer interactions promote academic achievement, social participation, and inclusive learning experiences.

The framework focuses on the interaction among the peer tutor, the student with intellectual disability, and the teacher facilitator. Peer tutoring provides individualized academic support through modelling, explanation, feedback, reinforcement, and collaborative learning. These interactions increase participation, motivation, communication, and independent learning skills.

Peer tutoring also promotes social inclusion by encouraging positive peer relationships, classroom participation, self-confidence, and a sense of belonging. At the same time, peer tutors develop empathy, leadership, and collaborative skills.

Teacher facilitation is essential for successful implementation. Teachers identify suitable peer tutors, provide training, monitor interactions, and adapt instructional strategies according to learner needs.

The framework proposes that effective peer tutoring leads to improved academic achievement, enhanced social skills, greater independence, and meaningful inclusion for children with intellectual disabilities.

V. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this conceptual review highlight the significant role of peer tutoring in promoting inclusive and effective educational practices for children with intellectual disabilities. The implications extend to classroom instruction, teacher preparation, educational policy, and school culture.

Implications for Inclusive Classroom Practices:

Peer tutoring supports the development of collaborative and inclusive classrooms by encouraging active participation and interaction among students. It enables teachers to address diverse learning needs through structured peer support while promoting meaningful inclusion rather than mere physical placement in mainstream classrooms.

Implications for Students with Intellectual Disabilities:

Peer tutoring provides academic, social, and emotional benefits for students with intellectual disabilities. It enhances understanding of academic concepts, communication skills, self-confidence, motivation, and independence. Positive peer interactions also foster acceptance, belongingness, and social inclusion.

Implications for Peer Tutors:

Students serving as peer tutors benefit through the development of communication skills, empathy, leadership, patience, and social responsibility. Peer tutoring promotes reciprocal learning and contributes to positive attitudes toward disability and inclusive practices.

Implications for Teachers and Educational Professionals:

Effective implementation of peer tutoring requires teachers to plan activities, train peer tutors, adapt instructional materials, and monitor student progress. Teacher education and professional development programs should therefore include evidence-based peer-mediated instructional strategies and their integration into Individualized Education Programs (IEPs).

Implications for Educational Institutions and Policy Makers:

Schools and educational authorities should recognize peer tutoring as an important component of inclusive education. Institutional support, adequate resources, teacher collaboration, and policy initiatives promoting evidence-based inclusive practices are essential for successful implementation.

Implications for Individualized Education Programs (IEPs):

Peer tutoring can be incorporated into IEPs to support goals related to academic achievement, communication, social interaction, adaptive behaviour, and classroom independence. Continuous monitoring is necessary to evaluate effectiveness and ensure alignment with individual learning needs.

Implications for Inclusive School Culture:

Peer tutoring contributes to the development of inclusive school communities by promoting cooperation, empathy, and respect for diversity. It supports a strengths-based perspective of disability and advances the broader goals of equity, participation, and social justice in education.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Despite the documented benefits of peer tutoring for children with intellectual disabilities, several limitations within the existing body of research should be acknowledged. Identifying these limitations is essential for improving the quality of future investigations and enhancing the effectiveness of peer tutoring practices in inclusive educational settings.

a) Methodological Limitations in Existing Research

A major limitation in the current literature is the variability in research methodologies, including differences in sample size, participant characteristics, intervention duration, and research design. Many studies have been conducted with small participant groups or within specific educational contexts, thereby limiting the generalizability of findings to broader populations of students with intellectual disabilities.

Furthermore, much of the existing research has primarily focused on short-term outcomes. Although improvements in academic performance, classroom participation, and social interaction have been reported, limited evidence is available regarding the long-term sustainability of these gains. Longitudinal research is therefore necessary to determine whether the positive effects of peer tutoring continue over time.

b) Variability in Learner Characteristics and Educational Contexts

Children with intellectual disabilities constitute a diverse group with varying cognitive abilities, communication skills, adaptive functioning, behavioural characteristics, and educational needs. Such diversity presents challenges in designing standardized peer tutoring models that are equally effective for all learners.

In addition, the effectiveness of peer tutoring may be influenced by contextual factors such as classroom environment, school resources, teacher expertise, peer relationships, and cultural expectations. Differences across educational settings may affect both implementation processes and student outcomes. Future studies should therefore examine the role of contextual variables in shaping the effectiveness of peer-mediated interventions.

c) Teacher Training and Implementation Fidelity

Although peer tutoring emphasizes student collaboration, successful implementation depends largely on teacher preparation, supervision, and program fidelity. Inadequate training of peer tutors or insufficient teacher guidance may reduce the effectiveness of the intervention and limit meaningful student engagement.

Similarly, inconsistent implementation may result in peer tutoring becoming an informal or unstructured classroom activity rather than a systematic instructional strategy. Future research should focus on identifying the critical components of effective peer tutoring programs and developing strategies to ensure consistent implementation across educational settings.

d) Challenges in Peer Tutor Selection and Training

The selection and preparation of peer tutors remain important factors influencing the success of peer tutoring interventions. Effective peer tutors require appropriate academic competence, communication skills, social maturity, and an understanding of their instructional responsibilities. However, current research has not established standardized criteria or universally accepted models for peer tutor selection and training.

Future investigations should examine effective training frameworks, including the duration of training, instructional methods, supervision procedures, and ongoing support mechanisms. Developing systematic

approaches to peer tutor preparation may improve the consistency and quality of peer-mediated learning experiences.

Future Research Directions

Future research should extend beyond immediate academic outcomes and explore the broader developmental impact of peer tutoring. Longitudinal and large-scale studies are needed to examine the sustained effects of peer tutoring on:

- academic achievement;
- communication skills;
- adaptive behaviour;
- social relationships;
- independence and self-determination; and
- participation in educational and community activities.

Further research should also include students with varying levels of intellectual disability and those with additional developmental or behavioural support needs.

Integration of Technology and Digital Peer Tutoring

Advances in educational technology offer new opportunities for expanding peer tutoring practices. Digital learning platforms, virtual collaboration tools, and technology-assisted instructional methods may provide alternative ways to facilitate peer interaction and support learning, particularly in situations where direct face-to-face interaction is limited.

Future studies should investigate the effectiveness of digital peer tutoring models and technology-enhanced collaborative learning approaches for students with intellectual disabilities. Such research may contribute to the development of more accessible, flexible, and individualized peer-supported learning environments.

Need for Culturally Responsive Peer Tutoring Models

Most existing studies on peer tutoring have been conducted within limited cultural and educational contexts, restricting the applicability of findings across diverse populations. Greater attention is needed to examine how peer tutoring can be adapted to different cultural settings, educational systems, and community environments.

Culturally responsive peer tutoring models should consider factors such as language, classroom norms, family involvement, social expectations, and community values. Adapting peer-mediated interventions to local contexts may enhance their relevance, acceptance, and overall effectiveness in diverse educational settings.

Development of Evidence-Based Implementation Guidelines

Future research should aim to identify the essential components of successful peer tutoring programs and develop practical implementation guidelines for educators. Large-scale experimental studies, comparative research designs, and systematic reviews can contribute to a stronger evidence base regarding:

- effective tutor training procedures;
- optimal tutor–learner matching strategies;
- appropriate intervention duration and frequency;
- methods for evaluating student progress;
- strategies for maintaining long-term program sustainability.

VII. CONCLUSION

Peer tutoring represents a significant and evidence-informed educational intervention that contributes to the academic, social, and emotional development of children with intellectual disabilities. By creating structured opportunities for peer interaction, collaboration, and mutual support, peer tutoring enables learners with disabilities to participate more actively in classroom activities while receiving individualized assistance suited to their learning needs.

The theoretical foundations of peer tutoring, including social learning theory, constructivist perspectives, behavioural learning principles, and inclusive education philosophy, demonstrate that learning is enhanced through meaningful interaction, guided participation, and supportive relationships. These perspectives explain why peer tutoring can be particularly beneficial for children with intellectual disabilities, who often require additional opportunities for modelling, practice, reinforcement, and social engagement.

Research evidence consistently indicates that well-designed peer tutoring interventions can improve academic achievement, classroom participation, communication skills, adaptive behaviour, motivation, and self-confidence among students with disabilities. Beyond academic gains, peer tutoring promotes social inclusion by encouraging friendship development, reducing isolation, and creating classroom environments characterized by acceptance, cooperation, and shared responsibility for learning.

An important strength of peer tutoring is its reciprocal nature. While students with intellectual disabilities benefit from peer assistance and increased learning opportunities, peer tutors also develop valuable interpersonal skills, including empathy, leadership, communication, and problem-solving abilities. Thus, peer tutoring contributes to the development of an inclusive classroom culture in which all students are recognized as active participants and contributors.

However, the effectiveness of peer tutoring depends greatly on careful planning, systematic implementation, and continuous support. Successful programs require appropriate selection and preparation of peer tutors, meaningful teacher involvement, individualized adaptation of activities, and regular monitoring of student progress. Without adequate structure and supervision, peer tutoring may not achieve its intended educational outcomes.

Future advancement of peer tutoring requires continued research examining long-term effectiveness, technology-supported peer learning models, culturally responsive approaches, and strategies for implementation across diverse educational settings. Strengthening the evidence base will enable educators to design more effective and sustainable peer-mediated interventions for students with intellectual disabilities.

In conclusion, peer tutoring should be viewed not merely as a supplementary teaching technique but as a comprehensive inclusive educational practice that promotes participation, independence, and social belonging. When thoughtfully implemented, it provides children with intellectual disabilities meaningful opportunities to learn, interact, and succeed alongside their peers. Therefore, peer tutoring represents an important pathway toward achieving the broader goals of inclusive education, educational equity, and lifelong learning for all students.

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