# Peer learning - Facilitating the integration of migrant students in education

Introduction

Peer learning is a collaborative approach to learning that places the learner at the centre, facilitates skills acquisition, wellbeing and interpersonal relationships and has been proven to contribute to academic achievement (Carvalho & Santos, 2021).

This policy brief outlines the meaning, importance and approach to peer learning as part of the Horizon 2020 innovative action KIDS4ALLL – Key Inclusive Development Strategies for LifeLongLearning. It presents the findings on peer learning emanating from the research carried out as part of KIDS4ALLL, explores the challenges and opportunities resulting from the constraints due to COVID-19 and provides recommendations to teachers, educators and policy makers on how to support peer learning initiatives to foster the integration of migrant students in education.

As education steers towards various online platforms, a virtual ecosystem is required in schools whereby peer learning is the prominent source to encourage engagement and learning (Wessel, 2015). Implementing peer learning as part of the curriculum should be based on the following four pillars in order to provide for a holistic approach to learning in today's world. Hence, learning to cooperate and be accountable during one-to-one connection with their peers (Boud, 2001); learning to be a critical thinker to enhance elf-education (Anderson & Soden, 2001) are all skills conducive to the efficacy of peer learning.
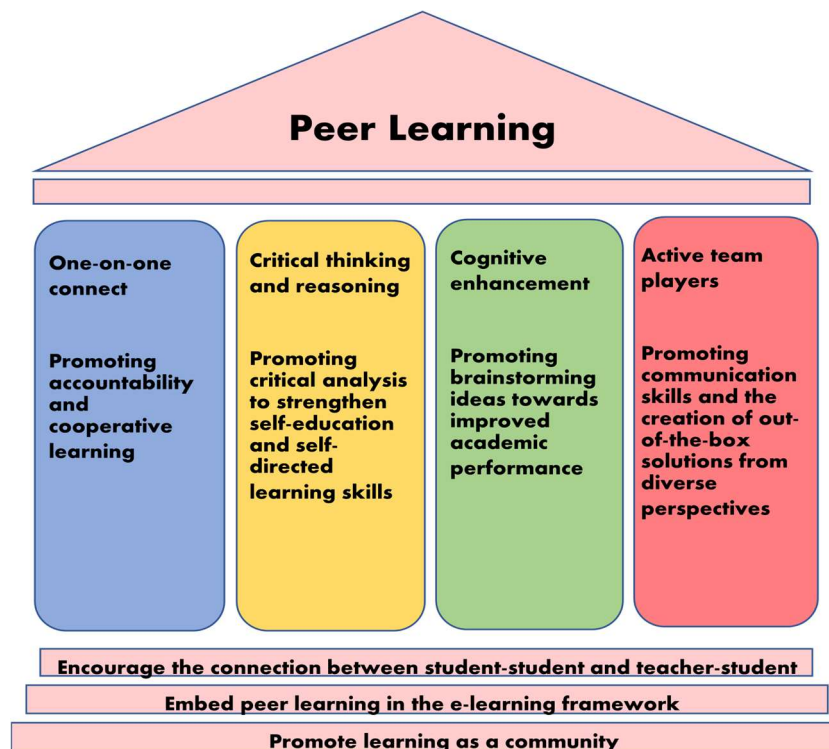
Note: diagram by author from: Wessel, 2015; Boud, 2001; Anderson & Soden, 2001

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The importance of peer learning in KIDS4ALLL

Everyone should have the lifelong right and opportunity to access high-quality education, regardless of their socio-cultural, political and economic background. This assumption is central when taking into account the challenges of contemporary education systems and, notably, the challenges faced by students with a migrant background (You, et al., 2020). Peer learning involves information, guidance and support from one individual to another. Peer learning has proven to be an effective approach to integration challenges, greatly benefiting members of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups (Manzoni & Rolfe, 2019). It is also crucial in promoting an inclusive and collaborative learning environment where learners are socialised to different outlooks and intercultural dialogue, in order to strengthen and enhance transcultural and interdisciplinary skills sets.

Peer learning in KIDS4ALLL is aimed at empowering learners to be actively involved in their own learning and consequently, in peer learning relationships. The outcome is the creation of a collaborative and inclusive learning environment to be tested in formal, non-formal and informal educational settings.

Peer learning

Peer learning can provide personal and emotional support, improving the learners educational experience (Hansford et al., 2004), development of their interpersonal skills and wellbeing (Mugumbate et al., 2020). This could involve older learners developing responsibility skills whilst younger learners acquire a sense of security, hence, helping in reducing the stress level of the learner (Anderson et al., 2015). Peer learning may originate from subjects determined by the curriculum, created by the schools or students' own ideas and plans, or as the product of voluntary associations.

Approach to peer learning in KIDS4ALLL

Our approach uses a three-fold learning path, encompassing knowledge acquisition, skills training and attitude transfer and, thus, a transformation of the actors involved from learners to mentor through:

- Fostering the eight lifelong learning key competencies
- Supporting teachers and educators adopting inclusive and participatory teaching fostering intercultural dialogue
- Testing peer learning through a buddy collaboration within a 9-months pilot phase

This involves the guided pairing of learners in a lifelong and life wide dimension, thus, enriching learning contents and learners' own socio-cultural experiences, which represents the real added value in a collaborative learning environment. KIDS4ALLL focuses not only on educational needs but also on socio-emotional and structural needs (Arnot & Pinson,2005), bearing in mind students' migration experiences, the diversification and evolving digitalisation of the learning community. Hence, encouraging open and effective dialogue among peers and breaking down social barriers is crucial.

Contributing to research on peer learning

KIDS4ALLL is an innovative action funded under Horizon 2020 and its initiatives based on research of existing good practices of peer learning.

The report on individuated best practises (KIDS4ALLL, 2021a) is based on research of peer-to-peer collaboration and mentoring schemes focussing on children (ISCED1-3) with a migration background and implemented in formal, non-formal or informal settings. The research analysed 65 good practises meeting these criteria emanating from EU projects, contained in databases of best practises and reported by project partners within their respective educational contexts.

The Benchmarked best practice report (KIDS4ALLL, 2021b) presents a benchmark analysis of 27 good practises of peer learning from 8 countries forming part of KIDS4ALLL.

Both analyses were based on the following four indicators:

- Affordability and potential facilitators of the initiative

- Institutional and social impact

- Innovation and sustainability

- Recognition and monitoring strategies of needs

The analyses identified a number of key factors influencing the success of peer learning:

- Projects should be designed strategically, flexibly and long-term (Philip & Spratt, 2007) and volunteers provided with the necessary support for their implementation (Premazzi & Ricucci, 2017).

- Interventions should be sensitive to the needs of the target audience (Mugumbate et al., 2020).

- Effectiveness of initiatives seems to be enhanced, if they are grounded in other overarching support measures (Hall, 2003)

- Initiatives require both grassroots and high-level structural and financial support and commitment to ensure relevance and successful implementation on the ground as well as long-term sustainability and scalability.

- A legislative framework ensures consistency, replicability and scalability across space and time. Networking and a multi-agency approach facilitate transferability.

- Robust evaluation mechanisms demonstrate the effectiveness of projects promoting trust and identifying areas requiring improvement. With reference to Zaloznik et al (2021) a five-phase approach is advocated consisting of definition; discovery, dream; design; and delivery.

Challenges and opportunities arising from COVID-19

Whilst COVID-19 shook the world, creating a sense of uncertainty about how schools can adapt from traditional classroom settings, it inspired change which might very well shape the future of education. Jill Ebstein (2021) quotes New Hampshire Commissioner of Education Frank Edelblut that "this is not a new problem. We shouldn't let the education system off the hook. COVID has simply exacerbated an existing problem and pointed out the need for new instructional models geared for minority and economically disadvantaged" (Ebstein, 2021, para. 4).

This unexpected situation impacted the mental health of educators, parents and students alike, amplifying in some instances existing challenges for some students, who were lost within the system, experienced a decreased motivation for learning or were disadvantaged in some other way. This was particularly the case for those from minority or economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

Yet, this pandemic has also, hopefully, created long-term positive effects such as

- the improvement of parental engagement,

- the implementation of online learning, or

- the move away from homogenous learning and towards more personalised models.

To this end evaluation and reflection on practices are needed to inform future development. Moreover, teaching should address COVID-19 and put it in a global and historical context (Daniel, 2020).

The students' socialisation needs were deeply impacted by COVID-19. Resorting to online learning meant the disruption of the school community, where relationships flourish and are strengthened (Daniel, 2020). Despite the effort of many schools to provide the most efficient opportunities for virtual interaction by use of online learning opportunities, these do not compare to structured settings where students can share interests and emotions (Fore & Hijazi, 2020). Such a disconnection also hinders the development of values which enrich students with skills to be 'conscious members of a solidarity-based community' (Colao et al., 2020).

Research on peer learning in KIDS4ALLL (KIDS4ALLL, 2021a, b) shows how important it is for learners to develop common interests and commitments with their peers, in which they engage not as migrants or nationals, but as human beings. A more inclusive and student-centered education and didactic methodologies, such as cooperative learning (based on student collaboration), may prevent students from feeling lost or detached from the school community. This may be applied to a number of educational tasks at different levels of education (Colao et al., 2020). Peer learning offers a great opportunity for students to practice skills such as:

- adaptability,

- resilience,

- decision-making, or

- problem solving.

These skills are much needed in this unpredictable world we live in not only for one's self but also for the benefit of others. Whether in a physical manner or online, peer learning gives learners a chance to have personal interactions with others and take an active role in the construction of their own learning process.

Empowering educators to be agents of change

Why? … Benefits of peer learning

''Peers are powerful agents of learning, reflecting their inherent and increasing influence during child development'' (Helseth & Frazier, 2018, p. 287). Learning may be facilitated by implementing peer based interventions in both formal and non-formal settings (Harris, 1995). Within a structure of peer assisted learning, educators can maximise opportunities for learning without too many instructions (Mathes and Fuchs, 1993). The role of the educator would be to supervise and monitor the behaviour while learners are on-task, encouraging natural social exchanges (Rubin et al., 2009). Working together in pairs accentuates the students' responsibility to achieve mutual goals, taking it in turns to act as tutors and sharing the success (Simmons et al., 1994).

Peer interactions are considered to be a normal part of a social dynamic, however, research has shown how learning engagement and task efficiency can also be directly linked to Peer Assisted Learning. This will help students develop holistically to become global citizens. "The new set of crises is forcing humankind to reconsider its relationship to each other, and to the planet and universe: it is essential that we proactively change the world through learning" (Fullan, Quinn, & McEachen, 2017, p.5).

Where? … Settings suited for peer learning

Peer Assisted Learning may be adapted to all forms of formal learning, through project-based initiatives linked to the curriculum. However, it is also essential to "look beyond school" (Erstad, 2019, p. 65) to create engaging and motivating opportunities for informal learning by involving community-based initiatives. At higher levels of education informal learning may assist learners to access knowledge "in their leisure time, in digital platforms, in peer communication" (Pereira et al., 2019, p.47), making learning meaningful.

How? … Implementing peer learning

Peer Assisted Learning strategies are best implemented by establishing a collaborative framework and collaboration strategies. Training is required for both educators and learners to maximise impact. Fuchs et al. (1996) suggest that educators present this strategy by starting slow. One could include three 35-minute sessions per week, preceded by the lesson prepared by the educator. These sessions would then increase gradually as learners master the skills needed for effective peer learning and collaboration. Additionally, eLearning platforms may be integrated, as is one of the aims of KIDS4ALLL, besides other tools such as: Padlet, J2E, Flipgrid, FAIE, Kaizala, Octavo, Powerpoint, Sway, and Yammer amongst many others which can be found online.

Providing a supportive framework for peer learning

Policy makers have an important role to play in promoting peer learning initiatives and facilitating the integration of migrant students. Research from KIDS4ALLL (2021a, b) has shown providing a supportive framework can facilitate peer learning to flourish by:

- Developing policies and strategies on the integration of migrant students and considering peer learning as one of the strategies facilitating their integration

- Developing a legislative framework to ensure consistency, replicability and scalability across space and time.

- Facilitating networking between actors supporting the integration of migrant students to facilitate the exchange and transferability of good practices

- Developing and implementing robust evaluation mechanisms of the integration of migrant students

- Providing volunteers with the necessary support for the implementation of peer learning projects by making available financial and human resources as well as guidance and training to successfully adopt and implement peer learning initiatives

- Supporting grassroots initiatives aimed at the integration of migrant students, particularly those building on peer-to-peer support

- Providing long-term support to projects to ensure long-term sustainability and scalability for example by integrating or connecting these to other overarching support measures

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