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Peer tutoring : a possible method for multi-ethnic education

Much of the writing about multi-ethnic education in Britain has concentrated on *content*, what should be taught. It is suggested here that a *method*, 'peer tutoring', which is applicable in all subject areas and to all pupils, may have special value in multi-ethnic schools. Certain aspects of peer tutoring (so far tried out mainly in the United States), will be discussed below, and then its special relevance to multi-ethnic education will be described.

Peer tutoring: how does it function and what are its effects?

In a typical peer tutoring project older pupils are trained to tutor younger pupils on a one-to-one basis (hence an alternative term is 'cross-age tutoring'). Usually one or two lessons a week are devoted to teaching a topic to the older pupils, the tutors, and then the other three or four lessons are used for the tutoring. Thus tutoring replaces time that might normally be spent by the older pupils on practising the topic. This cycle continues for two or three weeks, after which there is a return to normal classroom practice. A few weeks later another tutoring project may be undertaken to emphasise another important topic in the curriculum. By alternating the peer tutoring with normal instruction, neither procedure palls and pupils are not exhausted by the hard work of tutoring.

It should be particularly noted that when the topic to be tutored is one which the older pupils need to practise, the tutors benefit as much, if not more than, those they tutor. Thus peer tutoring should not be confused with the monitorial system, in which older pupils drill classes of younger pupils. This is quite a different procedure from one-to-one tutoring, since the major intention, in the monitorial system, has been that tutors should provide a service rather than that they should learn from a highly motivating experience.

Peer tutoring appears to be one of the most effective interventions yet found for improving achievement, both for tutors and those tutored: tutors learn the work thoroughly because they have to teach it and tutees benefit from individual attention. For example, Hartley (1977) examined 153 studies in order to assess the relative effectiveness of four methods of individualising instruction in mathematics. Tutoring was found to have been superior to Computer Assisted Instruction, Programmed Learning or 'Individual Learning Packages'. (The latter were materials designed and used in accordance with the 'mastery learning' concepts of Bloom 1968; and Block, 1971). Given this result, people do not find it a difficult one to explain. After all, it is reasonable to imagine that fellow pupils are more motivating and more informative than written materials or computers, and most teachers will confirm how much better a subject is learned when one goes through the process of teaching it. Despite this ready recognition of its value, the surprising fact is that peer tutoring was, until recently, used very little as a formal procedure in education. There have now been a few projects in UK schools (for example, Crone and Geddes 1978; Hurford 1980; Hagedorn 1980; Fitz-Gibbon and Reay 1982; Fitz-Gibbon 1981; Bond 1982) and considerable use of the procedure in the US, whence came Hartley's results.

In another meta-analysis (Cohen, Kulik and Kulik, 1982) the effectiveness of peer tutoring in comparison with traditional instruction was examined for 65

studies in which peer tutors taught topics in either reading or mathematics. For mathematics the same order of effectiveness as Hartley found was located: the average pupil involved in a tutoring project was likely to score higher than about 73 per cent of pupils receiving traditional instruction. For reading the latter figure was 58 per cent, again effective though somewhat less so.

These recent quantitative studies seem to confirm a much earlier, qualitative impression by an experienced educator/social psychologist, Herbert Thelen, who wrote:

... the educators ... feel that tutoring works. I can think of no other innovation which has been so consistently perceived as successful. (Thelen 1969: 230)

The particular value of peer tutoring in multi-ethnic schools

From 1978 to 1980, Professor Alan Little and Dr. Richard Willey of Goldsmiths College, London University, conducted a study for the Schools Council in the course of which they sent detailed questionnaires to all local education authorities (LEAs) in England and Wales, and to school heads and heads of departments in a stratified sample of secondary schools. Their first report, *Multi-Ethnic Education: The Way Forward*, provided confirmation of the impressions that many persons have of the present situation in multi-ethnic schools. It is frequently quoted in the following sections, which outline some of the main areas in which peer tutoring might make a positive contribution.

Pupil attitudes

There is little doubt that schools can suffer tensions and suspicions associated with 'race'. There may be few cross-ethnic friendships and some considerable 'distance' felt between the ethnic groups:

Some two thirds of authorities in areas of high and medium concentrations and half the heads of schools ... commented on aspects of race relations in schools which gave cause for professional concern - 'some underlying tensions, this part of town is where the National Front is active', 'many prejudices are passed on to children by parents and the wider society.' (Little and Willey 1981: 23)

How can schools counteract the fears and suspicions constantly fed by the wider culture? One of the best methods of 'immunising' pupils against tendencies to stereotype would be the promotion of close friendly relationships among pupils. However, exhortations to pupils to get to know each other would probably be useless, while just hoping that friendships will arise from proximity may not be enough. The hidden curriculum in schools promotes not friendship but competitiveness. Can this be changed?

If social psychologists were asked how schools might promote friendships the likely answer would refer to findings that people develop positive attitudes to each other when they share important tasks and work as 'partners' (Sherif *et al* 1954; Mirels and Mills 1964; and Darley and Berscheid 1967), an outcome predictable from the general class of theories known as balance theories (Homans 1961; Heider 1958). And indeed tutoring projects provide further confirmation of these theories. When pupils are paired up for tutoring tasks, very friendly feelings regularly develop after initial shyness is overcome. Asked to write about the tutoring project, tutees frequently volunteer how much they liked their tutor and tutors develop protective feelings toward 'their' tutees, often evincing more interest in their tutee's progress in school than in their own (Fitz-Gibbon 1981: Appendix B). This is the kind of observation that can be made in any tutoring project. But are the net effects of these small observable behaviours important or merely negligible?

Slavin (1979) analysed data from a large-scale survey of US schools that had been conducted by the Educational Testing Service when many schools were becoming racially desegregated. He summarised the findings as follows:

When a school district prepares to desegregate or wants to improve race relations among its students, it typically gets teachers and other staff together for workshops. These workshops usually involve a program designed to reduce the participants' prejudice and prepare them to work with new students. School districts also set up minority history classes, buy new books that show people of different races in positive roles, and so on. In other words, if prejudice is the problem, reduce everyone's prejudice and everything will be fine.

Except it doesn't work. We . . . found that teacher workshops, minority history, multi-ethnic texts, biracial student advisory committees, and similar school programs made no difference in the racial attitudes or interracial friendships of high school students. From our analysis, which was based on 51 desegregated high schools all over the country, it was clear that the human relations programs did little for student race relations. Talking to teachers and students didn't seem to make much difference . . .

However, one variable measured in the ETS data made a strong and consistent difference – the question asked of students, 'How often has your teacher assigned you to work on schoolwork with a student of another race?' This variable had a strong impact on the number of interracial friendships in the school, on positive attitudes toward integration and toward other races, and on students' feelings of being comfortable with students of other races. (Slavin 1979: 322-323)

Thus theoretical predictions, observations of tutoring projects in practice and survey data all suggest that pairing pupils for peer tutoring can promote cross-ethnic friendship and break down barriers, producing more positive attitudes and less stereotyping.

Teacher attitudes

While the 'Pygmalion' studies, (Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1968), do not stand up well under scrutiny (Elashoff and Snow 1971), there is nevertheless a valid concern that teachers should have positive attitudes towards their pupils, and reasonable levels of expectation for their success. Unfortunately, there are schools, both multi-ethnic and not, in which staff morale is very low. Years of struggling to teach by traditional methods have often left teachers with very jaundiced views of pupils, or at least of pupils *qua* pupils.

How can the situation be remedied? Firing or transfer of teachers can be ruled out immediately as impracticable, probably unjust and likely to be counter-productive. And exhortations are unlikely to change views which are daily reinforced in the circumstances of the traditional classroom. In tutoring projects, however, it is almost always the case that the teachers of the *tutors* see their pupils in a new light (cf Bond 1982). In their role as tutors most pupils behave responsibly and altruistically. Moreover, it is often those pupils who are normally the most trouble who take on the tutoring with most commitment. It is perhaps the genuine need that the younger pupils have for help which evokes in tutors a kind of conscientious behaviour that they do not usually display, and an altruistic concern that they do not usually have a chance to demonstrate. As a result many teachers are genuinely and pleasantly surprised, and peer tutoring leads to improvements in teachers' attitudes and expectations.

Resolution of the 'soft-hard' conflict in educational philosophy

What style of education do we want? Traditional, formal, direct instruction or open classrooms and project work? The debate continues without end. Direct instruction is said to give results, but the radical asks if test scores are all that matter in education. Maureen Stone came down in favour of 'formal methods' on the basis of 'parental support' as well as effectiveness:

Policy decisions should encourage teachers in urban schools to have as their primary objective the teaching of skills and knowledge and the development of associated abilities in children. Teacher training should emphasise that teachers' professional interest lies in 'the inducting of children into knowledge, skills and abilities' rather than in the provision of social work or therapy to children. (Stone 1981: 248)

Without being hopelessly anodyne, one can recognise legitimate concerns on both sides. Teachers should at least teach basic skills effectively; therapy cannot compensate for being unable to read and teaching is the contractual

obligation of those employed as teachers. Nevertheless, it may not be possible to return to the 'shut up and listen', formal instructional mode in a society in which authority structures are less secure than they once were. The active co-operation of pupils must be won by the teacher without resort to plain coercion. Plain coercion may work for a while but later pupils will vote with their feet.

Peer tutoring involves setting up a situation in which pupils focus on the task of direct instruction *willingly*, with enjoyment. The tutors recognise the dual purpose and the legitimacy of the situation: 'It helps some of us to learn too'; 'Nobody ever sat down with me for half an hour to show me fractions - the teachers haven't the time; more of us should help like this.' Direct instruction is not avoided but the atmosphere is changed to one for which many forms of 'alternative education' strive: an atmosphere of active participation, personal efficacy, interaction, co-operation, empathy and enjoyment. And since experiments have repeatedly shown that both tutors and tutees learn during tutoring sessions, (generally indeed they learn more than they do by normal direct instruction), one is getting the best of both worlds: affective goals are achieved while no sacrifice of basic instruction is made.

Meeting the need for mother-tongue instruction

One of the problems facing schools trying to provide some mother-tongue instruction is the large variety of languages for which provision might have to be made. The BBC, for example, recently broadcast a traditional folktale in seven languages (Punjabi, Urdu, Hindi, Gujarati, Sylhetic, standard Bengali and Cantonese) and more languages than that may well be among the mother-tongues of pupils in the school. A school may not be able to have a member of staff fluent in each language but a Tutoring Director could train those pupils who can already understand instruction in English to tutor those less fluent, using the mother-tongue. Tutoring can be used to teach the tutee not only English but also, for example, mathematics. Indeed, a pupil using the tutee's own dialect or language might be better able to get across a mathematical concept than a teacher trapped in his or her middle-class standard English. Tutees, moreover, may be more willing to ask questions of older pupils or to admit to them that they don't understand something.

Another possibly important point about providing mother-tongue instruction by the use of cross-age tutoring projects is that, since these projects involve *all* pupils, there is no danger of embarrassing minority pupils with special withdrawal programmes or unusual attention.

Valuing linguistic diversity

The Rampton Report (1981) identified three patterns of attitudes towards West Indian children's language. One pattern viewed their language as restricted or inadequate for learning, a 'deficit' view. Another viewed their language as producing problems by interfering with Standard English, while a third valued all languages and dialects as 'an important part of the child's linguistic repertoire' (p. 24). Teachers were urged to adopt the 'linguistic repertoire' viewpoint. In practice, however, while teachers may earnestly try to value their pupils' linguistic repertoires on principle, the effort will be forced if linguistic diversity is not of any use in their day-to-day experience. If, however, older pupils' linguistic skills were to be regularly enlisted on behalf of one of the major tasks of the school - cognitive instruction - these linguistic skills would become valuable in fact rather than only in principle.

The Rampton Report (p. 26) recommended that the Schools Council and LEAs should undertake to provide practical advice to teachers and the Schools Council Mother Tongue Project (SCMTP) is indeed doing so. A description of their project refers to the growing recognition that a child with another

language 'can be a positive aid to the acquisition of English and can be called to the support of more general learning.' (Schools Council 1983, emphasis added)

Encouraging more minority pupils to enter teaching

Little and Willey have drawn attention to the need for more teachers from ethnic minority groups:

A number of authorities and schools commented on the importance they attach to recruiting teachers from minority ethnic groups and on the disappointingly small numbers of such teachers... priority should be given to encouraging more members of minority ethnic groups to enter teaching. (op. cit. 1981: 24)

In a similar vein the Rampton Report (1981), after endorsing the House of Commons Select Committee's recommendation that there should be more teachers from ethnic minorities (House of Commons 1977) stated:

We would like to see more West Indians entering teaching through the normal channels, but, because of lack of the appropriate academic qualifications, many who might have wished to train have been unable to do so. (p. 63)

There are no long-term studies of the effects of the experience of tutoring on career choices, but anecdote and observation suggest that many pupils regard the experience of being a tutor as a chance to see if they enjoy teaching, and many find that they do. And again, since peer tutoring is an effective *academic* intervention, its regular use over a number of years should have the effect of improving examination results and thus enabling more minority pupils to qualify for teaching if they wish to do so.

Teacher Aide projects, such as one tried out in Newham by Beaumont (*SCTMP Newsletter*, No. 2, 1982, p. 3), may also be useful here, but such projects need to be distinguished from pupil *tutoring* projects. For example when sixth-formers act as teacher aides in primary classrooms the sixth-formers undoubtedly gain experience of the job of teaching and provide valuable help. But a Teacher Aide project is not as likely to produce the systematic *learning* gains in the older pupils that a well-designed cross-age tutoring project can produce. Moreover, fewer pupils can be involved in Teacher Aide projects and they must often be pre-selected 'good' pupils. By involving whole classrooms of pupils, a cross-age tutoring project reaches pupils whom other projects fail to reach.

Certainly, however, both Teacher Aide projects and cross-age tutoring projects should be used to encourage minority pupils to think about teaching as a career.

Home-school liaison

Some authorities have initiated innovative programmes for home/school liaison in multi-racial areas... 'great importance is paid to home/school liaison and use is made of every available resource to achieve it e.g. local community relations council and minority community leaders'... Schools stressed the importance of developing better links with parents - 70 per cent commented that minority ethnic group parents were less active than white British parents in parent-teacher associations and other forms of parental involvement. (Little and Willey 1981: 23)

Its own pupils are one of a school's most plentiful resources and those pupils who have been acting as tutors make excellent contacts between school and home on behalf of their tutees. They might be invited, for example, to call at the tutee's home to deliver a report of the tutee's progress on the topic which was tutored. In this way a contact is established between home and school in a manner which is less threatening than the dispatch of an adult to the home, and one which deals with a topic of immediate interest to the parent - the specific achievement of their own child.

Not a deficit model

An important last point is that peer tutoring is a recommended procedure for *all* pupils. It is not a prescription for *minority* pupils only, based on a notion of remedying deficiencies. It is not based on a deficit model, or on impugning family structures, research approaches which minority pressure groups have roundly condemned (see, for example the correspondence in the *Times Educational Supplement* (6 August 1982: 13)). Peer tutoring assumes that pupils can behave competently, responsibly and altruistically, and this assumption has been justified in practice.

Practical concerns

How might peer tutoring be arranged? Although teachers have managed to run tutoring projects with no extra commitment of resources, this is not to be recommended. Running a project is extremely demanding and, while teachers will stretch themselves to the limit for a while, they will eventually tire and return to less demanding, if less effective, management strategies. A shoe-string project might be undertaken as a pilot study to evaluate the procedure, but to give tutoring a fair chance to work effectively a member of staff and a room should be committed to the project.

Ideally a member of staff is relieved of at least some class-contact hours to act as a tutoring coordinator. The tutoring coordinator arranges tutoring for classes of older and younger pupils, trains the tutors and supervises the tutoring – unless the classroom teachers wish to undertake the training and supervision themselves. It is important to have a room designated a tutoring room and set up with about ten to fifteen carrels or booths, each large enough to accommodate a tutor and tutee. These booths are placed around the walls of the room while in the centre is the teacher's desk and a table laden with resource materials for the topic being tutored. Teachers send individual pupils or groups along to this room for supervised tutoring.

The provision of adequate resources is not a trivial detail but is essential to ensure that tutoring is accepted by teachers as a practical innovation.

Summary

Peer tutoring has been found to be one of the most effective innovations for improving achievement levels in basic skill areas such as reading and mathematics. It is also a procedure which pupils enjoy and which leads to a spirit of co-operation and empathy among the pupil-tutors and their teachers, as would be expected from social science theories and research findings. In a multi-ethnic school peer tutoring may have special benefits in breaking down barriers and making possible better mother-tongue provision and improved home-school liaison. It is surely a procedure worth considering.

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