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Peer mentoring for students with learning disabilities: the importance of shared experience on students' social and emotional development

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Students with Learning Disabilities (LDs) can experience classroom challenges that may negatively impact their social and emotional development, and these struggles can put them at risk for mental health issues and lower quality of life. Programs designed to support students with LDs need to consider not only academic skills and accommodations, but also the broader well-being of these students. Among interventions that address holistic student development are mentoring programs that utilize peer mentors (older students who also have LDs). The purpose of this article was to review key literature on the potential benefits of peer mentoring for students with LDs. According to reviewed articles, peer mentoring programs have been implemented in both school and university settings. In addition to conferring academic benefits to mentees, participation in these programs is associated with increased emotional well-being, higher self-esteem, and better communication skills among mentees. These programs may also benefit mentors, but these benefits have been understudied. More research is needed to determine the positive benefits of mentoring for mentors and mentees with similar learning characteristics, above and beyond positive benefits of mentorship in general.

KEYWORDS

mentoring, learning disabilities, socioemotional adjustment, education, tutoring

Introduction

Mentors can positively impact their mentees in many different ways, from serving as role models, to providing emotional support or guidance, to helping them cultivate specific skills (e.g., Ahrens et al., 2010). In particular, developing one-on-one mentoring relationships between individuals with similar learning characteristics could address current gaps in support for students with LDs. This review explores the concept of peer mentoring and summarizes existing literature on how peer mentoring programs in school and university settings benefit the social and emotional outcomes of student mentees with LDs.

Students with learning disabilities

Learning Disabilities (LDs) are defined by challenges in reading, writing, or mathematical abilities not associated with an individual's educational background or general intelligence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).¹ Students with LDs can experience classroom challenges that may impact reading, writing, preparing for tests, taking notes, listening in class, and developing organizational and study skills (Vogel et al., 2007; Kreider et al., 2018). When students with LDs struggle, they risk facing reduced employment opportunities, lower quality of life, and a range of social and emotional issues that can lead to mental health issues throughout their development (Haft et al., 2019). In addition, school-aged children with dyslexia² are also considered at risk for depression and anxiety (Mugnaini et al., 2009). Because academic challenges and social alienation can contribute to low self-esteem, struggling learners may self-stigmatize, or feel deserving of these negative feelings and experiences associated with their struggles (Haft et al., 2019). These social and emotional components could also contribute to career development difficulties that manifest in indecision and challenges in accurately assessing one's own strengths and weaknesses as they pertain to options for the future (Madaus, 2006).

In the U.S., some students with LDs are provided support through academic accommodations such as extra time, audiobooks, notetakers, and distraction-free environments. Historically, social and emotional needs of students with LDs are not addressed as part of their support (Hillier et al., 2019). Among a sample of college graduates with LDs, some have suggested that universities should offer more services related to disability awareness, self-advocacy, and workplace training due to reported difficulties transitioning into professional environments (Madaus, 2006).

While programs designed to support students with LDs have targeted academic skills and accommodations, the broader well-being of students with LDs, such as their social and emotional development, has begun to receive substantially more consideration in recent years (Cavioni et al., 2017). Some researchers have found that mindfulness interventions, or semi-regular meditation practices, positively affect the development of social skills in elementary school-aged children with LDs (Esmaeelbeygi et al., 2020). Other researchers and programs have found that empowering school-aged students with LDs through non-academic, extracurricular, and physical activities can improve their self-confidence, skill development, and relationships (Cavioni et al., 2017). Mentoring relationships provided by guidance counselors and teachers have also been linked to positive outcomes such as increased graduation rates and higher self-esteem among adolescents with LDs (Ahrens et al., 2010).

What is peer mentoring/tutoring?

Peer mentoring is a one-on-one or small group practice that can provide individuals with disabilities a platform for self-expression, independence, and active participation in their own development (Hillier et al., 2019). This practice typically refers to an older member of the LD community helping a younger member with a LD both inside and outside of the classroom (Wexler et al., 2015; Alzahrani and Leko, 2018). Programs that utilize peer tutoring may differ from peer mentoring in that peer tutoring more specifically addresses academic growth (Vogel et al., 2007). For the purposes of this review, *peer mentoring* is used as the broader term to identify programs and practices that offer social and emotional support, even if those programs also included peers providing academic skill development.

To benefit the emotional, psychological, academic, and career development of a mentee, one design for peer mentoring pairs an older member of the community with a mentee who shares a common profile but differs in age and experience. Some researchers refer to this design as *near peer mentoring* (Haft et al., 2019). This allows the mentors to draw from their own experiences in developing skills, efficacy, and wellbeing in the face of similar challenges (Glomb et al., 2006; Haft et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2019). Through this form of mentoring, peer role models with LDs have been shown to positively impact the lives of their mentees at both school and university levels of education (Glomb et al., 2006; Haft et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2019).

What does the research say about pairings for mentoring and tutoring?

A growing body of research suggests that mentoring and tutoring programs benefit students with LDs. To systematically examine the existing evidence of peer mentoring for students with LDs, we conducted a scoping literature review using the following keywords: mentorship, peer mentorship, peer tutoring, and students with learning disabilities. We considered only articles in peer-reviewed journals, published anytime before 2023, and included any level of education in this search. The results yielded approximately 40 articles, the majority of which focused on the impacts of peer tutoring on improving academic outcomes for students with LD. We added to our existing search the keywords: mentors with LD. This addition reduced the number of relevant articles to five, which are summarized in Table 1. We then expanded the criteria to include all interventions for students with LD, including those that did not focus on academic outcomes, and this resulted in the eight additional articles. Table 2 provides a brief summary of the 13 articles included in the review. We summarize and integrate their findings in the following sections.

Existing research suggests that, when mentors have similar lived experiences as their mentees, their skill sets have been shaped by familiar challenges, and they possess wisdom that can be imparted to their mentees (Glomb et al., 2006; Haft et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2019). However, it is important to note that there is limited research comparing the effects of programs that use peer mentors with LDs versus those programs that use mentors without LDs on the outcomes of student mentees with LDs. Thus, the focus of this mini-review is on programs that paired students with LDs with mentors who also have LDs with recommendations for future research to conclusively

1 Within the research reviewed, Specific Learning Disability, Learning Disorder, and Learning Disability are used somewhat interchangeably, but they all hold the same meaning in terms of categorizing a range of challenges in reading, writing, and/or math.

2 A learning disorder that affects decoding, spelling, accurate, and fluent reading (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

TABLE 1 Notable content and make up of peer mentoring from past research.

PAIRING	SUPPORT	MENTORING	SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL
<p>Recruit mentees identified through partner organizations and/or communities ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Encourage students to register with University Disability Office, which can help to identify mentors and mentees ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Match similar characteristics (LD, gender, demographics, socio-economic status, shared interests, similar area of study/major) to the extent possible ^(1,3)</p>	<p>Offer incentives (tuition, financial support, and/or course credit) ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Provide faculty assistance (scheduling sessions, and building relationships) ⁽³⁾</p> <p>Train mentors with professionals prior to program implementation ⁽⁴⁾</p> <p>Ensure continuous guidance by administrators/faculty ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Allow mentors to draw from their own experiences ⁽¹⁾</p>	<p>Begin by checking on general well-being ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Engage in non-academic activities (art projects, sports, or recreational reading aloud) ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Host sessions at least 1 hour per week during school year ^(2,3)</p> <p>Provide information on symptoms of LDs ⁽⁴⁾</p> <p>Help students access faculty, administrative, and peer support ⁽⁴⁾</p>	<p>Assign mentees journaling exercises ⁽¹⁾</p> <p>Discuss social challenges, peer pressure, self-care, stress reduction, stigma and perceptions of LDs ^(3,4)</p> <p>Use arts and crafts to address socio-emotional needs ⁽²⁾</p> <p>Assist behavioral and emotional regulation with positive feedback for effective coping ⁽⁵⁾</p> <p>Work on communication skills to support self-advocacy ⁽⁴⁾</p>

(1) Glomb et al., 2006; (2) Haft et al., 2019; (3) Hillier et al., 2019; (4) Kreider et al., 2018; (5) Shamir & Lazerovitz, 2007

document the impacts of mentors with LDs (vs. mentors without LDs) on students' with LDs socioemotional outcomes.

Benefits of school programs

One peer mentoring program sought to combine academic and social support for grade school students. This program recruited peer mentors from a pool of university students who had registered their own LDs or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (Glomb et al., 2006). Program directors formed partnerships with community organizations dedicated to child learning and development and paired these mentors with school-aged children with LDs/ADHD from surrounding areas. Spanning three years, mentors met with their mentees for one hour per week to socialize and provide academic support. Often this support involved imparting specific learning strategies acquired by mentors through their own experiences (Glomb et al., 2006). Overall, parents and teachers reported significant improvements in mentees' homework completion and attitudes about school. While the findings were not specific to social and emotional development, mentees' parents and teachers, and mentees themselves, felt that these benefits depended upon the shared identity and mentor's lived experience (Glomb et al., 2006). Please see Table 1 for more details from this program and others.

With further emphasis on mentee holistic development, one program examined social and emotional outcomes in children and adolescents after one academic year of a peer mentoring program implemented by the organization Eye to Eye (Haft et al., 2019). Eye to Eye pairs elementary and middle school-aged students with LDs, ADHD, or LDs and ADHD combined with peer mentors, ages 16 to 32, who have both or either of these diagnoses as well. Using the insight from both educators and young adults with LDs and ADHD seeking to support the mental health needs of students, Eye to Eye's programming focuses on social and emotional support by inspiring confidence and awareness in students through creative self-expression and artistic activities that take place between the peer mentoring pairs

(Haft et al., 2019). At the end of the school year, researchers compared outcomes for mentored students with LDs/ADHD, non-mentored students with LDs/ADHD (control group-non-mentored [control-NM]), and non-mentored students without LDs/ADHD (control group – typically developing [control-TD]). At the beginning of the year, before engagement with the peer mentoring sessions, students with LDs/ADHD had higher scores on scales of depression and lower scores on measures of interpersonal relations (indicating that the students felt a lack of success and satisfaction when relating to others) than the control group-TD. At the end of the school year, after working with the mentors, the mentored students with LDs/ADHD reported higher self-esteem, lesser incidence of depression, and sustained interpersonal relationship scores compared to the non-mentored students with LDs/ADHD (Haft et al., 2019). The only significant difference over time for the control-TD group was a drop in interpersonal relations scores, but this group still had overall higher scores on this measure than the mentored and control-NM groups. It is interesting to note that not only did measures of self-esteem significantly increase for the mentored group between fall and spring, but this group also had higher scores on measures of self-esteem than the control-TD group by the end of the school year (Haft et al., 2019).

The benefits of peer mentoring may also extend beyond mentee well-being. There is evidence to suggest when school-aged mentors provide their services to younger students, they are enhancing their own social and emotional well-being by actively exploring career options, learning social skills through teaching and communication, and experiencing the rewarding nature of helping others (Karcher, 2009). Moreover, the literature shows the benefits of peer mentoring for mentors who guide younger members of their own communities across a range of group identities and shared characteristics including formerly incarcerated peer mentors from the juvenile criminal justice system (LeBel et al., 2015), elder peer mentors with intellectual disabilities (Mahoney et al., 2018), and peer mentors in a variety of professional settings (Ghosh and Reio, 2013). Recruiting individuals with LDs to become peer mentors could be a means of validating their life experiences and instilling confidence.

TABLE 2 Studies considered in literature review.

Authors	Year of publication	Title	Level of school considered	Age range of mentees	Selection criteria for mentors
Ahrens et al. (2010)	2010	Naturally acquired mentoring relationships and young adult outcomes among adolescents with learning disabilities	Middle and high school	Grades 7–12 at initial assessment	Guidance counselor and teachers
Alzahrani and Leko (2018)	2018	The effects of peer tutoring on the reading comprehension performance of secondary students with disabilities: A systematic review	Middle and high school	Unspecified	Unspecified
Cavioni et al. (2017)	2017	Social and emotional learning for children with Learning Disability: Implications for inclusion	School-aged	Unspecified	Unspecified
Esmmaelbeygi et al. (2020)	2020	The effects of mindfulness intervention on the social skills of students with specific learning disability	Elementary school	8 years old	Unspecified
Glomb et al. (2006)	2006	The learning leaders mentoring program for children with ADHD and learning disabilities	Elementary	6–18 years old with majority between 6–12 years old	Undergraduate students with LDs
Haft et al. (2019)	2019	Impact of mentoring on socio-emotional and mental health outcomes of youth with learning disabilities and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder	Elementary and middle school	8–16 years old, average age was 11.79 years old	Peer mentors, ages 16 to 32, with LDs
Hillier et al. (2019)	2019	Outcomes of a peer mentoring program for university students with disabilities	University	18 years and older	18 years and older with LDs
Karcher (2009)	2009	Increases in academic connectedness and self-esteem among high school students who serve as cross-age peer mentors	Elementary	Fourth and fifth grade students	High school students (mostly grades 10 and 11), Average age was 15.5 years old
Kreider et al. (2018)	2018	Beyond academics: A model for simultaneously advancing campus-based supports for learning disabilities, STEM students' skills for self-regulation, and mentors' knowledge for co-regulating and guiding	University	Average age 21.2 years old (SD = 3.5 years)	Graduate students and faculty
Madaus (2006)	2006	Improving the transition to career for college students with learning disabilities: Suggestions from graduates	University graduates	18 and older	Unspecified

(Continued)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Authors	Year of publication	Title	Level of school considered	Age range of mentees	Selection criteria for mentors
Shamir and Lazerovitz (2007)	2007	Peer mediation intervention for scaffolding self-regulated learning among children with learning disabilities	Elementary	Second grade students	Fifth grade students
Vogel et al. (2007)	2007	Peer tutoring for college students with learning disabilities: perceptions of tutors and tutees	Undergraduate	First and second year university students	Third and fourth-year university students
Wexler et al. (2015)	2015	A synthesis of peer-mediated academic interventions for secondary struggling learners	Middle and high school	Ages 11–18	Unspecified

Benefits of university programs

With an interest in evaluating peer relationships, one program examined the effects of having third and fourth-year university students without LDs assist with the development of first and second-year students with LDs (Vogel et al., 2007). Throughout the course of an academic year across many universities, hundreds of peer mentors and mentees³ were interviewed. From these reports, the third and fourth-year undergraduates without LDs noted their own lack of ability to address the nature of the academic and social difficulties faced by students with LDs as a significant limitation to their ability to provide help and services. Similarly, the first and second-year students experienced frustration communicating with a supportive peer whom they perceived to have limited understanding of their personal experiences dealing with LD-specific challenges. The authors suggest that these interpersonal and communication difficulties were founded in a lack of lived experience and that recruiting and training peers with LDs could provide students with LDs a meaningful guide through academic, institutional, and social challenges (Vogel et al., 2007). These findings suggest that near-peer mentoring in pairs of students where both have LDs would ameliorate common sources of friction among mentorship pairs where the mentor has limited experience with LDs and associated challenges. On the other hand, peer mentoring by graduate students without LDs can produce benefits for undergraduate students with LDs while raising mentor and campus-wide awareness of the needs of students with LDs and the importance of their advocacy (Kreider et al., 2018).

Being a mentee in a program with mentors from a similar background is believed to be effective due to increased solidarity through shared experiences among people with similar characteristics

and/or identities, particularly if there are hardships associated with those shared experiences (Hillier et al., 2019). Researchers have examined the potential positive impact that peer mentors with LDs can have on their mentees with LDs at the university level (Hillier et al., 2019). This program covered topics ranging from “socializing on campus, peer pressure, time management, communicating with peers and professors, classroom etiquette, study skills, and seeking help and campus resources” (Hillier et al., 2019, p. 493). At the end of the program, mentees reported positive attitudes regarding their transition to university, confidence in their ability to succeed, a clear understanding of academic expectations, gaining social skills that helped them meet other students, and learning the inner workings of the university disability support services (Hillier et al., 2019).

Discussion

Social and emotional well-being, self-advocacy training, disability awareness, and career development for students with LDs are not typically provided by schools and institutions of higher learning, yet these are essential for the success of young people with LDs in new academic and professional environments (Madaus, 2006). The literature on peer mentoring programs could be useful when addressing the holistic needs (both academic and social) of students with LDs. Mentoring programs that support student-aged children and young adults with LDs provide benefits in many of these aforementioned areas (Ahrens et al., 2010, p. 208). Peer mentoring by older, more experienced individuals with LDs can make a positive difference in the lives of younger students with LDs as well as benefiting the mentors’ social and emotional well-being (Glomb et al., 2006; Haft et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2019). This article has briefly summarized the extant literature with a focus on articles that pair mentees with LDs with mentors who also have LDs.

The limitations of our review should be noted and addressed in future research. As with any review of the published literature, there could be a publication bias in the findings that we summarized. Specifically, it could be that many ineffective peer mentoring/tutoring programs exist but were not published, because publication favors significant findings. In addition, the articles reviewed are quite

³ Vogel et al. (2007) refer to their program as peer tutoring, but it has overlapping characteristics with what can be considered peer mentoring. Vogel et al. (2007) state, “Although the major emphasis of the tutoring is academic, there is an implicit assumption in PERACH [tutoring program] that through the tutoring relationship, some social and emotional needs of the tutees will indirectly be addressed” (487).

heterogeneous with respect to the ages of mentees, selection of mentors, and focus of the programs, which makes it challenging to draw generalizable conclusions. The diverse nature of the studies may limit the ability to identify consistent patterns or best practices in peer mentoring for students with LDs. It is not yet possible to predict when, and for whom, peer mentorship will be the most impactful. Moreover, “learning disabilities” is a broad term that collapses across distinct conditions. As programs focused on neurodiversity continue to be implemented and evaluated, we hope that future research will be able to focus on the impacts of peer mentorship for distinct types of neurodiversity rather than for mentors and mentees with LD altogether.

As researchers continue to uncover the benefits of peer mentorship for the development of students with LDs, program design and evaluation should systematically incorporate mentor outcomes such as academic performance and graduation rates, mentee social and emotional well-being, including the co-occurrence of mental health conditions, and career/professional development for both mentor and mentee. Showing that these programs can positively impact both peer mentor and mentee would provide stronger evidence in favor of the widespread implementation of peer mentoring programs across schools and universities.

More research is required to show that mentors with LDs have a specific advantage over non-LD mentors, but the reviewed evidence (and summarized in Table 1) may suggest that mentors with LDs could be useful (Glomb et al., 2006; Haft et al., 2019; Hillier et al., 2019). Past research has not explicitly compared these factors in a controlled setting, and future research is warranted to determine if these are indeed critical elements of peer mentoring programs for students with LDs. Moreover, because LDs do not exist in a vacuum, it is important to acknowledge that students’ experiences will also be shaped by other factors impacting their learning and development. Future research should also consider racial/ethnic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors when recruiting peer mentors, pairing peer mentors and mentees, implementing programs within communities, and examining outcomes from these programs. These other facets of identity and community could be significant in terms of how shared lived experience between peer mentor and peer mentee can impact outcomes of peer mentoring. Similarly, it is important to interrogate the findings and limit the generalizability of outcomes from programs when only homogenous samples of students and peer mentors are examined.

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In summary, while more comparative research is required to infer the most beneficial elements of peer mentoring programs, pairing struggling, young learners with experienced peers (especially those who also have LDs) could provide the support needed to influence the success and well-being of the next generation of students and leaders with LDs.

Author contributions

CW: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft. JC: Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing. AQ: Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FH: Conceptualization, Funding acquisition, Supervision, Writing – review & editing.

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Conflict of interest

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