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Lessons | Edward B. Fiske

When Johnny can't read his sixth-grade book, an eighth-grader might be able to help.

In their never-ending search for bold new teaching methods, modern-day school reformers are returning to a staple of the one-room schoolhouse: letting students teach and counsel each other.

In Manhattan, sixth graders at Public School 41 in Greenwich Village are enlisted to teach second graders about science; older students at nearby P. S. 130 help kindergartners with their reading. At Plainfield and several other urban high schools in New Jersey seniors lead freshmen in weekly discussions of topics like drugs and academic pressures.

The rediscovery of what educators call peer teaching is buoyed by considerable scholarly evidence that getting teachers away from the blackboard and handing some teaching duties to students pays off handsomely. It enhances the self-confidence of the tutors, provides individualized instruction for the pupil being helped and creates a more cooperative classroom environment.

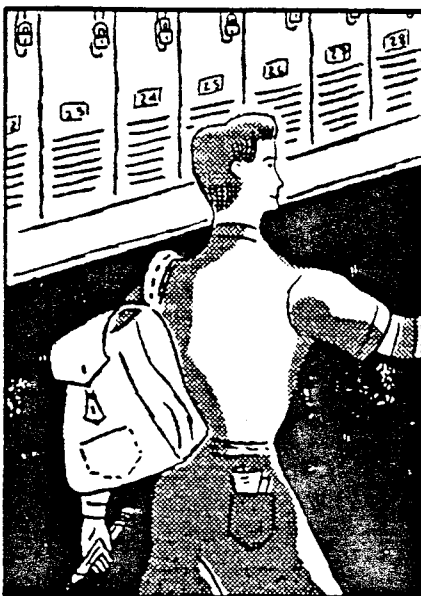
A 1984 study by Henry M. Levin of Stanford University even found that it is "far more cost-effective" than using computer-assisted instruction, reducing class size or lengthening the school day.

Peer teaching's long history goes back to the 17th-century Moravian school reformer John Amos Comenius, who offered the dictum "qui docet, discit" (he who teaches learns). In 19th-century America even the teachers were frequently only a chapter or two ahead of their students. The use of high school students to teach younger children was a key element of Mobilization for Youth and other anti-poverty programs of the 1960's.

The practice is back in fashion. "People are more open to restructuring classrooms and letting teachers do different things," said Frank Riessman, a professor of education at the City University of New York, who has encouraged the idea for more than 25 years.

Sharon Rose Powell, a psychologist who developed the peer counseling program at Plainfield, sees it as a way of making peer pressure into a positive force. "You hear so much about the negative influence of peers," she said. "But if older students can be made aware of the way in which they affect other students, good things can happen."

The use of students to teach other students takes several forms. Community School District 2 on the East Side of Manhattan has trained more than 100 people in the art of "cross-age" tutoring, which means that



older students — in this case fifth and sixth graders — teach younger ones.

Another approach is for teachers to divide classrooms, teach something to half the students and then let them teach it to the other half. "Kids tend to be more motivated to learn if they know they have to teach it to someone else," Mr. Riessman said. "It also makes learning more fun."

Peer counseling normally has older high school students working with younger ones. In Plainfield, a dozen seniors selected to take part in the Peer Leadership Training Program begin the school year by attending a three-day retreat. They then take courses in group dynamics and leadership techniques during the school year.

Each week the seniors, working in pairs, hold discussion groups with 10 to 14 freshmen. One day last week, Benjamin Miller and Jamon Watson led a discussion of the meaning of friendship. One technique was to ask each freshman to tell "something my friends do that worries me."

A survey last year of literature on peer tutoring by Diane Hedin of the University of Minnesota found conclusive evidence of its effectiveness.

Most of the studies found that both tutors and those being tutored make academic gains and that the tutors frequently showed "dramatic changes in self-confidence and self-image as well as higher motivation to learn and to achieve."

The Educational Testing Service will soon publish a study of freshmen in the peer counseling program in three New Jersey high schools. It will conclude that, compared with a control group, the participants earn higher grades in English and mathematics and are less likely to be absent from school or even late.

Educators with experience in peer teaching and counseling say that it is important to give tutors some training on such matters as how to ask questions.

A most encouraging wrinkle in the research on peer teaching is that the biggest gains often come with student tutors who themselves are having academic difficulty. In its own survey of the literature the Harvard Letter, published by the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, speculated on why.

"(Some) students have stopped studying because they do not want to read 'baby' books or work on elementary math problems," it said, "but they can learn little from materials written at their grade level. Tutoring gives them an excuse to review the basics. It also forces them to think about how they learn and to break tasks into manageable bites."

