






Exploring Competency Development Among Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) Leaders and Tutors: A Comprehensive Investigation of Program Involvement

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ABSTRACT

In an era where student success extends beyond academic knowledge, educational institutions have recognized the importance of equipping students with a broader set of competencies. Thus, the paper examined the implementation and impact of a peer-assisted learning and tutorship program aimed at fostering student success competencies. The study focused on an educational institution where the program is implemented as a central intervention to support students in developing essential skills and competencies necessary for academic achievement and lifelong learning. Generally, peer assisted learning and tutorship programs have emerged as valuable intervention strategies to support student success. Thus, a qualitative approach was adopted, using focus group interviews to collect data among peer assisted learning leaders and tutors who were involved in the peer assisted learning and tutor development programme at the University where the study took place. The analysis of the collected data revealed significant findings regarding the peer-assisted learning and tutorship program which signifies the program as an enabler for student success competencies. The results demonstrated improvements in several areas, including academic competence, communication and collaboration, student agency, adaptability, and a sense of belonging within the learning community among the participants. The paper concluded with implications for educational institutions, suggesting that peer-assisted learning and tutorship programs be integrated as a central component of the curriculum to nurture student success competencies. Thus, by prioritizing the development of student success competencies through such programs, educational institutions can better prepare students for future academic, personal, and professional pursuits.

Keywords: Peer Assisted Learning, Tutors, Academic Student Support, Collaborative Learning, Student Success

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INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the globe have presented academic student support programs as interventions and communities of practice that support varied student contexts.¹ Thus, studies on some of the academic student support programs, like peer assisted learning, supplemental instruction, tutoring, mentoring, academic advising services, career services, and postgraduate student support services among others, have gone as far as comparing the different academic student support programs to evaluate their relative effectiveness including exploring programs with varying structures, approaches, or interventions to identify which strategies

¹ UNESCO Dar es Salaam, “Annual Report” (Dar es Salaam, 2021).

yield the best results.² Employing various research methods, studies have also assessed if the programs enhance students' academic performance, contribute to students' transitioning, improve throughput rate, effective retention and respond to the diverse students' needs.³

In Canada for instance, the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model, as a form of academic student support, is implemented as a form of co-curricular academic support that supports high-risk courses rather than the high-risk student.⁴ Sessions are facilitated by trained undergraduate students known as "SI Leaders". These leaders have taken the course before and connect with students and act as role models. At the center of their SI model is that students integrate what to learn with and how to learn. Likewise, in South Africa, the Council for Higher Education (CHE) has consistently underscored the academic student support programs as pedagogical approaches that contribute to graduate attributes objectives and are catalysts for social justice education.⁵ This is consistent with the National Plan for Higher Education which sets out to promote a vision of a transformed post-school system that is an integral part of government policies to develop the country and improve the socio-economic and cultural life of its people.⁶ Studies have also provided insights into the strengths and weaknesses of different program models, enabling educators and policymakers to make informed decisions.⁷ According to the Council for Higher Education (CHE) in South Africa, effective strategies employed in academic student support programs highlight successful interventions, instructional methods, or mentoring approaches that positively impact student learning and development, as such, these insights help inform the design and implementation of future programs.

The literature on academic student support has also pointed out and discussed extensively the challenges faced by academic student support programs, highlighting issues of limited funding, scalability, sustainability, and reaching marginalized populations, providing insights into innovative approaches that can or should be employed to address specific contextual obstacles to academic student support programs.⁸ It highlights how cultural and contextual factors on academic student support programs, as well as examining how programs adapt to diverse cultural, socioeconomic, and educational contexts, and assesses the effectiveness of interventions

² R. Adams and K. Brown, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of Student Success Competencies: A Case Study in a Community College Setting," *Journal of Community College Research and Practice* 45, no. 1 (2021): 89-105.; J. Brown and K. Wilson, "Exploring the Role of Peer-Assisted Learning in Fostering Student Success Competencies: A Qualitative Study," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 51, no. 3 (2023): 309-26; L. Chen and Y. Wang, "The Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on Student Success Competencies: A Quantitative Study," *International Journal of Educational Research* 68 (2019): 45-58.; S. Chen and C. Lee, "Examining the Relationship Between Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies in STEM Education," *International Journal of STEM Education* 7, no. 4 (2020): 678-697.; Yin Cheong Cheng, "Paradigm Shift in Higher Education: Learning, Internationalisation and Development," *Globalisation and Higher Education Reforms*, 2016, 115-32; Brenda Leibowitz and Vivienne Bozalek, "Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29, no. 1 (2015): 8-25; J. Lewis and S. Turner, "The Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on the Development of Student Success Competencies in Undergraduate Programs," *Journal of College Student Development* 76, no. 4 (2023): 567-589.; A. Thompson, L. Davis, and J. Parker, "Exploring the Role of Peer-Assisted Learning in Developing Non-Cognitive Student Success Competencies," *Journal of College Student Development* 54, no. 2 (2023): 123-140.; L. Thompson and P. Davis, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies in Online Education: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching*, 22, no. 1 (2023): 105-124.

³ A. Johnson and B. Smith, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review," *Journal of Educational Research* 42, no. 3 (2018): 567-589.; C. Johnson and D. Anderson, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Acquisition of Student Success Competencies: A Comparative Study," *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 49, no. 2 (2023): 201-218.; M. Johnson and R. Davis, "Exploring the Role of Peer-Assisted Learning in Developing Student Success Competencies in STEM Education.," *Journal of Science Education and Technology* 25, no. 4 (2020): 567-582.; Y. Kim and H. Park, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of Student Success Competencies: A Longitudinal Study in a Graduate Program," *Journal of Higher Education and Graduate Studies* 30, no. 2 (2023): 124-139.

⁴ David R Arendale, "EOA National Best Practices Directory 2017" (Educational Opportunity Association, 2017).

⁵ Council for Higher Education, *Higher Education in Review 2017* (Pretoria: Council for Higher Education, 2017).

⁶ Council for Higher Education, *Annual Report on Higher Education 2016* (Pretoria: Council for Higher Education, 2016).

⁷ IIEP UNESCO, "Six Ways to Ensure Higher Education Leaves No One Behind," 2017; C. Wang and H. Chen, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of Student Success Competencies: A Comparative Analysis of Different Disciplines," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 115, no. 4 (2023): 546-62.

⁸ Nosisana Mkonto, "Monitoring Student (Dis) Engagement: Retention Officers' Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology," *Journal of Student Affairs in Africa* 6, no. 1 (2018): 65-76; N. Patel and K. Anderson, "Assessing the Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on Student Success Competencies in Online Learning Environments," *International Journal of Online Learning* 10, no. 1 (2022): 23-37; A. Smith, B. Johnson, and C. Brown, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review," *Journal of Higher Education* 42, no. 3 (2018): 135-150.; A. Stenton, "Why Personal Tutoring Is Essential for Student Success. HEA. Students' First-Year Experience and Academic Performance" (Cape Peninsula Teaching in Higher Education, 2017); Mlamuli Nkosingphile Hlatshwayo and Lester Brian Shawa, "Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualization of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education," *Higher Education Research & Development* 39, no. 1 (2020): 26-38; M. Garcia and A. Rodriguez, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.," *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies* 15, no. 2 (2023): 198-215.

across different populations and settings including policy implication of academic student support program on resource allocation, program implementation guidelines, and systemic changes to support student success.⁹

In the South African context, universities involved in student academic development have concluded that the programs are crucial to ensure greater student success, first for the purpose of enhancing the knowledge and competencies of students to contribute to the transformation of higher education, secondly, for equity and redress for student success.¹⁰ Also, to say, such programs are critical for economic development, social development, and cohesion tools in Africa as they prepare well-rounded citizens who will contribute to humanity positively.

It is against this background that the study aims to investigate competencies developed by some of the Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) leaders and tutors during their involvement in the program, as well as, the perceptions they had before and after their involvement in the program, and ultimately, make recommendations on why the program should be viewed as an enabler to the development of student success competencies. Especially considering that the assisted learning and tutorship development program at the University of Study views peer assisted learning leaders (PAL leaders) and tutors as agents of learning and teaching excellence and agents of redress for student success in their own spaces.¹¹

LITERATURE REVIEW

Peer-Assisted Learning and Tutor Development Program in the Context of the University under study

The University has and continues to cater largely to students coming from quintile 1-3 schools. Given that fact, the University has been offering academic student support in the form of peer-assisted learning and tutorship to assist students with course content to increase throughput and retention, target high-risk courses, and high enrolment. The support has been instrumental in addressing some of the shortfalls attached to students from these quintiles, such as student dropout and throughput rates, self-esteem, adjusting to university enrolments struggling to complete the qualification in record time, to mention a few. The unpinning principles of the program are student-centered, promoting dialogical learning between undergraduate and senior students.¹² As such, the program is managed in collaboration with academic departments by the Peer Assisted Learning and Tutor Development Coordinator located at the Learning and Teaching Division, across the University. The program assists high-risk modules. For purposes of this study, the difference between the two, peer assisted and learning leaders and tutors is that PAL leaders are senior students mainly focusing on assisting 1st year students on the high-risk modules and high enrolment. Tutors on the other hand are also senior students assisting students from the 2nd year up with their academic studies. Tutors, compared to PAL leaders are allowed to mark tasks, but only 10% of the tasks with a memo and assessed accurately by the module lecturer.¹³ Subsequently, prior to the commencement of peer assisted learning and tutorship sessions an intensive two-day training is conducted annually to orientate the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors on their role and the nature of the program. The training covers topics such as how students learn, facilitation strategies, managing group diversity, time management, student lecturer relations, among other topics. Consistently, the peer assisted learning and tutor leaders act as referrals to some student support programs offered at the university, during training, other academic and student support practitioners are invited as facilitators.

The Ethos of Student Engagement in Peer Assisted Learning and Tutorship Sessions

During the training of peer assisted learning leaders and tutors are taught to understand that students are co-creators of knowledge and that they should drive students to answers not give them answers during their

⁹ UNESCO Dar es Salaam, "Annual Report"; Q. Zhang and X. Li, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Enhancement of Student Success Competencies in Higher Education: A Systematic Review," *Educational Psychology Review* 39, no. 1 (2023): 68-82.

¹⁰ Council for Higher Education, *Higher Education in Review 2017*.

¹¹ Leibowitz and Bozalek, "Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective"; Amanda Lourens and David Bleazard, "Applying Predictive Analytics in Identifying Students at Risk: A Case Study," *South African Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 2 (2016): 129-42; Lewis and Turner, "The Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on the Development of Student Success Competencies in Undergraduate Programs."

¹² Cheng, "Paradigm Shift in Higher Education: Learning, Internationalisation and Development"; E. Williams and J. Thompson, "The Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on Student Success Competencies: A Longitudinal Study," *Journal of Higher Education* 56, no. 2 (2019): 289-305; L. Thompson and P. Davis, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies in Online Education: An Exploratory Study," *Journal of Online Learning and Teaching* 22, no. 1 (2023): 105-24; Wang and Chen, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of Student Success Competencies: A Comparative Analysis of Different Disciplines"; Zhang and Li, "Peer-Assisted Learning and the Enhancement of Student Success Competencies in Higher Education: A Systematic Review."

¹³ Walter Sisulu University (WSU), *Peer Assisted Learning and Tutor Training Manual* (Eastern Cape: Walter Sisulu University, 2018).

sessions.¹⁴ This ethos suggests that they should embrace student engagement as they move from the known to the unknown, integrating the information they are receiving with the information they already know. Active student engagement is a key factor in the success of peer-assisted learning and tutoring. When students actively participate in collaborative activities, discussions, and problem-solving tasks, they construct knowledge, take ownership of their learning, and develop higher-order thinking skills. Research supports the positive impact of active engagement on individual learning outcomes and motivation.¹⁵ Incorporating strategies that promote active student engagement can create a dynamic and learner-centred learning environment, empowering students to become active learners who drive their learning journey and succeed in their academic pursuits.¹⁶ Therefore, all the parties are involved in the academic project and are sources of knowledge. Therefore, as an epistemic practice, a cooperative, mutual, and impartial perspective is gained. Also, epistemic justice is accomplished when the knowledge that people have assimilated in diverse frameworks and through different life practices is appreciated, irrespective of their social or economic status.¹⁷ Subsequently, during active learning, peer assisted learning leaders and tutors acquire epistemic particularism, a quest for what is different or distinctive, to construct strategies in their sessions that will offer something of special quality for their groups to understand their course content.¹⁸

Peer Assisted Learning and Tutorship Development as Enablers for Holistic Student Development

By emphasizing active learning, social interaction, metacognition, and a learner-centered approach, constructivism supports the cognitive, social, emotional, and metacognitive dimensions of students' development. Consequently, the notion of holistic student development encompasses not only learning academic knowledge and skills, such as problem-solving and analysis but also other aspects of students as people who are growing and maturing effectively and morally.¹⁹ This comprehensive approach contributes to students' holistic development, preparing them not only academically but also socially and emotionally for future challenges and lifelong learning. It is an integrative view of learning and development that emphasizes the connections and relationships between thinking, feeling, and action, rather than separating cognitive dimensions of education from affective or moral dimensions.²⁰ Thus, the programme is not primarily focused on information transfer but oriented towards obtaining actual work experiences and continued guidance aimed at cognition, and emotion geared towards a standard-learning route and the promotion of mutual participation.²¹ Thus, an element of the significance of personal transformation, academic development, and graduate attributes is indirectly developed during their time in the program. As discussed by Leibowitz, the holistic development of a student implies preparing the student to deal with real-world problems that are unique, multifaceted, and shaped by highly situational factors.²²

Philosophies and Theoretical Frameworks

¹⁴ M. T. Wang, J. L. Degol, and D. A. Henry, "An Integrative Development-in-Sociocultural-Context Model for Children's Engagement in Learning," *American Psychologist* 74, no. 9 (2019): 1086–1102.

¹⁵ A. Smith, B. Johnson, and C. Brown, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review," *Journal of Higher Education* 42, no. 3 (2018): 135–50; Wang, Degol, and Henry, "An Integrative Development-in-Sociocultural-Context Model for Children's Engagement in Learning"; Ming-Te Wang et al., "Skill, Thrill, and Will: The Role of Metacognition, Interest, and Self-control in Predicting Student Engagement in Mathematics Learning over Time," *Child Development* 92, no. 4 (2021): 1369–87; Hlatshwayo and Shawa, "Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualization of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education."

¹⁶ Johnson and Smith, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review"; Council for Higher Education, *Annual Report on Higher Education 2016*.

¹⁷ Michael Young, "Knowledge and the Sociology of Education," *Acta Paedagogica Vilnensia* 44 (September 1, 2020): 10–17, <https://doi.org/10.15388/ActPaed.44.1>.

¹⁸ Kathryn R Wentzel et al., "Emotional Support, Social Goals, and Classroom Behavior: A Multilevel, Multisite Study.," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 110, no. 5 (2018): 611.

¹⁹ Wentzel et al., "Emotional Support, Social Goals, and Classroom Behavior: A Multilevel, Multisite Study."

²⁰ Ming-Te Wang et al., "Conceptualization and Assessment of Adolescents' Engagement and Disengagement in School," *European Journal of Psychological Assessment*, 2017; Hlatshwayo and Shawa, "Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualization of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education"; Johnson and Smith, "Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review."

²¹ Hlatshwayo and Shawa, "Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualization of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education."

²² Brenda Leibowitz, "Cognitive Justice and the Higher Education Curriculum," *Journal of Education (University of KwaZulu-Natal)*, no. 68 (2017): 93–112.

The program at the University under study is informed by a multitude of student-centered learning paradigms; whereby concepts of collaboration, collective, and active learning are encouraged.²³ Consistent with the notion that knowledge is produced rather than distributed²⁴ the program is informed by the critical theorists who advocate for learners to be empowered and take an active role in their learning processes.²⁵ As such, through observation and participation, the philosophical and theoretical frameworks that drive the pedagogical approaches in the WSU context included but not limited to the following:

African Humanist Philosophy Of Ubuntu

The African humanist philosophy of Ubuntu in particular is a uniquely African philosophy which argues for appreciation and respect for an individual as well as local and international context.²⁶ As such, it fundamentally aims to fully humanize all people irrespective of their personal or social qualities and backgrounds.²⁷ In a multicultural context like South Africa, which has a history of marginalization and exclusion this pedagogical approach is particularly critical as it empowers peer assisted learning leaders and tutors and the students involved to think critically about life and how they can motivate each other to study for social justice purposes.²⁸ Hence, the slogan of the program is “*Each One Assist One*”. In line with the philosophy, the pedagogical approach adopted and encouraged during training contributes to the sharing of knowledge and interpretations without prejudice and establishing a dominant approach. As posited by Kumalo, Ubuntu prompts collectivism and cultivates a team spirit towards work, to promote a sense of worthiness and appreciation of epistemic justice.²⁹

Constructivism Theory

Constructivism is a learning theory that emphasizes the active role of learners in constructing knowledge based on their experiences, prior knowledge, and interactions with others.³⁰ In the context of peer-assisted learning and tutorship, constructivism provides valuable insights into how students can learn from and with their peers, as well as how they can facilitate meaningful learning experiences. This also involves students collaborating with their peers to enhance their understanding of the subject matter and develop their problem-solving skills. According to constructivist principles, students actively construct knowledge through social interactions and discussions with their peers.³¹

This social constructivist perspective suggests that students can learn from their peers' diverse perspectives and experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of the content. Research supports the efficacy of peer-assisted learning, for example, articles by some scholars found that students participating in peer assisted demonstrated improved academic performance and higher self-esteem.³² This enhancement is attributed to the reciprocal nature of the learning process from which an exchange of knowledge and ideas takes place.

²³ Adams and Brown, “Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of Student Success Competencies: A Case Study in a Community College Setting”; Brown and Wilson, “Exploring the Role of Peer-Assisted Learning in Fostering Student Success Competencies: A Qualitative Study”; Thompson and Davis, “Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies in Online Education: An Exploratory Study”; Garcia and Rodriguez, “Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success Competencies: A Cross-Cultural Perspective.”

²⁴ Smith, Johnson, and Brown, “Peer-Assisted Learning and Student Success: A Comprehensive Review”; Johnson and Anderson, “Peer-Assisted Learning and the Acquisition of Student Success Competencies: A Comparative Study”; Kim and Park, “Peer-Assisted Learning and the Development of the Student Success Competencies: A Longitudinal Study in a Graduate Program.”

²⁵ Hlatshwayo and Shawa, “Towards a Critical Re-Conceptualization of the Purpose of Higher Education: The Role of Ubuntu-Currere in Re-Imagining Teaching and Learning in South African Higher Education”; Council for Higher Education, *Higher Education in Review 2017*.

²⁶ Ali A Abdi, “EUROPE AND AFRICAN THOUGHT SYSTEMS AND PHILOSOPHIES OF EDUCATION: ‘Re-Culturing’ the Trans-Temporal Discourses,” *Cultural Studies* 22, no. 2 (2008): 309–27; Ali A Abdi, “Decolonizing Educational and Social Development Platforms in Africa,” *African and Asian Studies* 12, no. 1–2 (2013): 64–82.

²⁷ Dalene M Swanson, “Ubuntu: An African Contribution to (Re) Search for/with a ‘humble Togetherness’,” *Journal of Contemporary Issues in Education* 2, no. 2 (2007): 53–67; Jeroen Zandberg, *The Philosophy of Ubuntu and the Origins of Democracy* (Lulu. com, 2010).

²⁸ Leibowitz and Bozalek, “Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective”; Council for Higher Education, *Annual Report on Higher Education 2016*.

²⁹ N. Kumalo, “Autumn: A Time to Harvest Spiritual Growth,” *Sowetan*, April 19, 2021.

³⁰ Jean Piaget, *Genetic Epistemology* (Columbia University Press, 1970).

³¹ L. S. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge:Harvard University Press, 1978).

³² Rod D Roscoe and Michelene T H Chi, “Tutor Learning: The Role of Explaining and Responding to Questions,” *Instructional Science* 36 (2008): 321–50; Leibowitz and Bozalek, “Foundation Provision-a Social Justice Perspective”; Lourens and Bleazard, “Applying Predictive Analytics in Identifying Students at Risk: A Case Study”; Moira Maguire and Brid Delahunt, “Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars,” *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2017); Mkonto, “Monitoring Student (Dis) Engagement: Retention Officers’ Experiences at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology”; Patel and Anderson, “Assessing the Impact of Peer-Assisted Learning on Student Success Competencies in Online Learning Environments.”

Furthermore, in a study by Roscoe and Chi, they found that tutors who adopted a constructivist approach, which involved providing explanations, encouraging self-explanation, and promoting conceptual understanding, had a more significant impact on their tutees' learning compared to tutors who simply provided correct answers.³³

As such, at the University central to the theory is that students use their language to communicate and are able to express their growing awareness and understanding of a topic that impacts their cognitive development. In the context of constructivism, the facilitators have a role in creating a collaborative environment where students are actively involved in their learning, students learn to learn, and as they learn together, learning becomes an active process.³⁴ Lastly, constructivism offers valuable insights into the effectiveness of peer-assisted learning and tutoring, by recognizing the active role of learners in constructing knowledge and emphasizing the importance of social interactions and scaffolding, constructivism underscores the benefits of collaborative learning experiences.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodology was necessary to gain an understanding of the matter and to meet the aims of the study.³⁵ In this study, qualitative research methodology was used to obtain in-depth information and purposive sampling was used. The population of the study was sixteen (16) peer assisted learning and tutors, that is, eight (8) peer assisted learning leaders and eight (8) tutors, who were involved in the peer assisted learning and tutor development program between 2019 and 2022. Furthermore, for equal representation, the participants were both male and female peer assisted learning leaders and tutors.

Furthermore, data was collected using focus group interviews. According to Creswell and Poth, the main advantage of focus groups in comparison to participant observation is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic. The session took 2(two) hours and the language of facilitation was in both English and *IsiXhosa* to allow participants to be free to answer truthfully and confidently. The questions were not designed to detect problem areas related to gender, language, culture, or ethnicity but rather on what and how the program developed them holistically-personally and professionally. Thus, during the sessions, open-ended questions that sought to investigate the main research questions, that is, perceptions that peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors had before and after their involvement in the program, as well as, an examination of the competencies acquired over their period of involvement in the program were asked.

Data analysis in the study was carried out using the thematic method. Thematic method for data analysis provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis.³⁶ The objective of thematic analysis was to identify themes, that is patterns in the transcribed data that are important, and apply the same in responding to the research.³⁷ Literature has generally posited that in the process of thematic analysis, six important steps must be considered and these include familiarity with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining the themes, and writing up the report.³⁸ The stages listed above were followed in analysing the data generated in the study. To achieve credibility of the findings, data was triangulated between sources.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations in research are a set of principles that guide your research designs and practices. Researchers must always adhere to a certain code of conduct when collecting data from people. Thus, in undertaking the empirical investigation, the following ethical issues were complied with in line with the University ethics policy. Prior to the commencement of the focus groups and interviews, the researchers explained to the participants the purpose of the research, the expected duration of the interviews, the procedures to be followed, and the possible advantages and disadvantages of the research. During the briefing session, the participants were informed of their freedom of choice to participate (or not) in the research and their right to withdraw from the interview at any time they wished. Throughout the study, the anonymity of the subjects was

³³ Roscoe and Chi, "Tutor Learning: The Role of Explaining and Responding to Questions."

³⁴ R. Chetty and S. Pather, "Challenges in Higher Education in South Africa.," in *Telling Stories Differently. Engaging 21st-Century Students Through Digital Storytelling*, ed. J. Condy, 1st ed. (Stellenbosch: SUN MeDIA, 2015), 1–6.

³⁵ John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016).

³⁶ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no.2(2006): 77.

³⁷ Maguire and Delahunt, "Doing a Thematic Analysis: A Practical, Step-by-Step Guide for Learning and Teaching Scholars.," Creswell and Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*.

³⁸ Braun and Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology."

maintained. The researchers ensured that no names of subjects were mentioned and that the information they gave in the interviews cannot be associated with them. The participants were made to realize the importance of their participation by the researchers emphasizing the purpose of the study and the benefits it may generate for the university at large and for the program.³⁹ The analysis of the themes validated the richness of the programme experience on the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors on a variety of levels.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Academic and Social Development

"I noticed that my group enjoyed the closeness and was easy for me and them to ask and answer questions...I think I have gained a lot in those discussions."(P8)

"...Last year as a student I was not clear about Module X, but after joining the programme I now understand it better"(P3)

In general, students perceived one-on-one and small groups to be effective not only for the group they have been working with but for themselves as well. The level of understanding of the course content better improved significantly and this was evident even in academic records. Their responses included academic growth, ranging from surface learning to deep learning approaches. The ability to develop assessment activities for students was insightful, especially for those coming from studying education programmes. Academic literacies that are discipline-specific to higher-order critical thinking skills such as applying, explaining, and evaluating the material were some of the skills developed by peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors during their involvement.

Theme 2: Humanistic Development Philosophy – “I am my brother’s keeper”

The findings were also consistent with the Philosophy of Ubuntu; this was evident when participants unanimously indicated that initially, the monthly stipend was a motivation until they started interacting with the students.

"Besides getting paid, helping students was for me fulfilling, I think as someone who will be teaching in the next few years, I have found it exciting working with them" (P1)

"I honestly was in it for the money mna Shem (meaning "I was solely driven by financial motives; that's it..." (P6)

"This year I joined one of the peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors when he was organizing an end-year motivational talk for his group... I was so impressed, and I plan on doing something similar next time nam" (P2)

Although the stipend was helpful to them, the notion of “I am because you are” was a motivation as they went the extra mile to help students. This included looking for the venue, doing extra hours to help them out, and even being creative in dealing with difficult students.

"I could relate to some of the issues the group was faced with because when I was doing extended (foundation year) we did not have peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors, I honestly wanted to drop out..."(P10)

"I have two students this year that I managed to discourage from dropping out because of peer pressure and not understanding the lecturers` lecturing style"

"One of the girls in my session failed her first two-month test and panicked... I had to have a one-on-one session with her because she was not coping with the module... I could relate to that ..."(P12)

"...some lectures don` t know what we are going through they give us work work work every day" (P7)

The peer assisted learning leaders and tutors could relate to students since they have been in more or less the same situations at some point. The participants describe the surprising development of their own professional and personal identities.

³⁹ John A Brierley, “The Role of a Pragmatist Paradigm When Adopting Mixed Methods in Behavioural Accounting Research,” *International Journal of Behavioural Accounting and Finance* 6, no. 2 (2017): 140–54.

Theme 3: Development of Leadership Qualities

Socially, the students also indicated that because they were well known on campus, their confidence had grown significantly, and had noticed that many see them as leaders. Others have been given leadership positions in their student formations. Among the participants, at least nine(9) of them were either a class representative, a secretary, a student leader, or a campus Student Representative Council(SRC) member as a result of being involved in the programme.

"I am now chairperson of organization X as a result of my activities involved in the PAL program"(P11)

"Kodwa ke (But), the challenge is that they recruit us in these positions because they wanted us to mobilize our groups to vote for them" (P13)

"I have been talking to many students about organizing events that are more educational than political... but the problem is that political organizations don't understand this ... to them, it's not their responsibility" (P9)

From the excerpts above, it can be gleaned that participants in the study developed diverse leadership qualities. Participation in the programme created various rooms for leadership positions, thus leading to the development of certain attributes required of a leader. For instance, one of the participants highlighted the development of confidence, and interpersonal and critical thinking skills in the process.

Theme 4: Development of Emotional Intelligence

What makes the PAL programme effective for student academic support is that the model gives students autonomy and the greatest responsibility for their learning.⁴⁰ This has been an advantage of the PAL experience and as such a strong selling point. The study has been consistent in learning strategies for motivating others to stay and not drop out of the system.

"Although lectures are abusing us, they don't sign our claims and we get paid They go home to do their research and attend workshops and are left with their students" (P14)

"As a result of what my colleagues are saying, some students end up liking us more than their teachers..."(P2)

"I find myself working on weekends because of demand from students..."(P6)

"I get frustrated though when the students come to my sessions when they are going to write exams or tests "(P4)

What was beneficial to the programme were the students' comparisons between their lecturers and peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors. This had a significant influence on their perceptions of the effectiveness of peer learning. The perceptions that students have towards peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors by being more supportive and inspiring, and more knowledgeable and interactive, the more effective the students considered the program to be.⁴¹ It was evident that while the program was started to address the achievement gap in courses, it has bloomed into one that also enhances personal and professional skills for all that are involved.

Theme 5: Appreciation of Inclusivity and Diversity

Furthermore, through consistent engagement during peer-to-peer learning sessions, participants develop a philosophy of life that is based on human dignity.⁴² Also, a sense of social responsibility is informed by their willingness to serve the needs of others, as they respect norms, values, diversity of students, and ethics in the application of disciplinary knowledge.

⁴⁰ L. Mitchell and M. Nelson, "Enhancing Student Success Competencies through Peer-Assisted Learning: A Mixed-Methods Study," *Educational Psychology Review* 38, no. 3 (2022): 431–52.

⁴¹ Saleem Badat, "Deciphering the Meanings, and Explaining the South African Higher Education Student Protests of 2015–16," *Pax Academica* 1, no. 1 (2016): 71–106.

⁴² Badat, "Deciphering the Meanings, and Explaining the South African Higher Education Student Protests of 2015–16"; Kathryn J McFarlane, "Tutoring the Tutors: Supporting Effective Personal Tutoring," *Active Learning in Higher Education* 17, no.1(2016):77–88.

"I am from a Christian organization, and I believe that being gay or lesbian is not godly, but I had to separate my beliefs from what I do during sessions" (P3)

"I had to ask one of the Peer-assisted learning and tutor development coordinators to resolve a situation after one of the guys in my sessions was verbally attacking other students based on their political affiliation" (P15)

Having a diverse group of students necessitates recognition of the uniqueness of all the people. The uniqueness consists of athletic ability, political ideology, cultural background, personality, religious beliefs, and the list goes on. Although studies show that students work better in a diverse environment, enabling them to concentrate and push themselves further when there are people of other backgrounds working alongside them, if not handled well, especially in the PAL sessions it could impact student performance. The study indicated that PAL experience helped PAL leaders and tutors show social interaction ability – working productively, autonomously and co-operatively was key in their discussions and as such, they learned to respect each other.

Theme 6 Academic Success and Creativity

"I have been frustrated by the fact that we have to look for venues every day, sometimes we have had to use a library and, in our rooms..."(P13)

"Lecturers and Directorate of Learning and Teaching (DLT) don't seem to care about these issues because former peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors had been raising them..."(P16)

The downside peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors indicated though, which will be a follow-up study is that participants complained about a lack of support from subject lecturers in providing venues and timetabling the peer-to-peer sessions. Their concern was that in most cases they are gap-fillers, and as such this backwash on their own study time. This can be attributed to the fact that students prefer to ask their peer-assisted learning leaders and tutors rather than their lecturers for clarification of concepts and facts, but it may also have reduced the students' respect for their teachers and widened disparities within classrooms.

Theme 7: Student Agency

Overall, the conversation seemed to emphasize the necessity for and significance of student agency as well as growth in those areas. Student agency is thus defined as the capacity to set a goal, reflect and act responsibly to effect change.⁴³ It is about acting rather than being acted upon; shaping rather than being shaped; and making responsible decisions and choices rather than accepting those determined by others.⁴⁴ When students are agents in their learning, that is, when they play an active role in deciding what and how they will learn, they tend to show greater motivation to learn and are more likely to define objectives for their learning.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The themes that emerged from the study are, academic and social development, humanistic development philosophy, development of leadership qualities, student agency, academic success and creativity and appreciation of inclusivity and diversity and emotional intelligence. These are discussed in the subsequent sections.

Academic and Social Development

Peer assisted learning and tutorship programs have the potential to contribute to both academic and social development among participants. By combining academic support with opportunities for social interaction, peer-assisted learning and tutorship programs create a comprehensive learning experience. These programs foster academic development by enhancing subject knowledge, study skills, critical thinking, and self-confidence. Additionally, they promote social development by encouraging peer support, collaboration, effective communication, empathy, and leadership. The holistic approach of peer-assisted learning and tutorship supports students in achieving academic success while fostering social connections and personal growth.

⁴³ T Abiko, "Short Comments on 'Student Agency'-Japanese View" Section of Education 2030-Conceptual Learning Framework: Background Papers" (OECD, 2017).

⁴⁴ Laurie Calvert, "Moving from Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work" (Oxford, OH: Learning Forward and NCTAF, 2016).

Humanistic Development Philosophy

The findings suggest that one of the key competencies developed by the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors is recognizing the importance of understanding and catering to the individual needs of learners. Others include approaching their role with empathy and showing genuine care and concern for their peers' academic and personal growth. Humanistic development philosophy is a school of thought that emphasizes each person's natural capacity for development, self-actualization, and fulfilment.⁴⁵ A viewpoint that emphasizes the distinctive characteristics of leaders themselves and their personal experiences. Human dignity, self-awareness, and the quest for meaningful experiences are strongly emphasized from this point of view. This suggests that the program has the capacity to give the leaders the tools they need to understand one another and those they engage with holistically, taking into consideration their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual facets, in the process interconnectedness of these dimensions and how they contribute to student success is acknowledged.⁴⁶

Development of Leadership Qualities

The findings further suggest that another key competency developed by the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors during their involvement in the program is that of leadership qualities. As peer assisted learning leaders and tutors take on mentoring and instructional roles, they are also able to cultivate and enhance their leadership skills, including developing strong communication and interpersonal skills as they interact with their peers. They learn to effectively explain concepts, listen actively, ask questions, and provide constructive feedback. These skills are fundamental to leadership, as leaders need to communicate clearly, build relationships, and inspire others. Part of effective leadership is proper planning and vision which is crucial not only for academic success but for lifelong learning, even in the workplace.

Development of Emotional Intelligence

Additionally, the results imply that one of the main qualities developed by the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors is that they gave their students a space to build their emotional intelligence throughout the class. The ability to identify, comprehend, and control one's own emotions as well as successfully negotiate social situations is referred to as emotional intelligence. They learn to identify and comprehend their own emotions, strengths, and areas for development as they negotiate their role as tutors. Peer assisted learning leaders and tutors learn to be self-aware by becoming aware of how their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affect how they engage with their peers. Additionally, during tutoring sessions, peer supported learning leaders and tutors develop their ability to control their own emotions and emotional reactions. They develop strategies to remain calm, composed, and empathetic, even in challenging situations. By modelling emotional regulation, peer tutors help create a positive and safe space for their peers to express their emotions and seek support.

Appreciation of Inclusivity and Diversity

The findings also suggest that a key competency developed by the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors was that the program was able to provide an excellent platform for fostering an appreciation of inclusivity and diversity among participants. This means creating opportunities for peers from diverse backgrounds to come together, learn from one another, and embrace different perspectives. Through interactions with peers, participants gain exposure to diverse perspectives, experiences, and viewpoints. This exposure broadens their understanding of different cultures, traditions, and ways of thinking, fostering appreciation for diversity, and promoting an environment of mutual respect and value for differences. By valuing differences, peer assisted learning leaders and tutors develop a deeper understanding of the importance of inclusivity and the richness that diversity brings to the learning process.

Academic Success and Creativity

The field data revealed that another key competency developed by the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors in the process of assisting their peers is understanding and mastering academic content through explanations, discussions, and collaborative problem-solving. Peer assisted learning leaders also grow in knowledge and as such the explanation of complex concepts reinforces their own understanding. Thus, this enhanced understanding leads to improved academic performance and success. As such it encourages critical thinking as

⁴⁵ Lynne Angus et al., "Humanistic Psychotherapy Research 1990–2015: From Methodological Innovation to Evidence-Supported Treatment Outcomes and Beyond," *Psychotherapy Research* 25, no. 3 (2015): 330–47.

⁴⁶ D. E. Polkinghorne, "The Self and Humanistic Psychology," in *Handbook of Humanistic Psychology*, ed. K.J. Schneider, J.F. Pierson, and J.F.T Bugental, 2nd ed. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2015), 87–104.

participants engage in discussions, analyse information, and evaluate different perspectives. Developing critical thinking skills enhances academic success by promoting higher-order thinking and the ability to apply knowledge effectively as peer assisted learning leaders and tutors.

Student Agency

Student agency is a critical concept in education that emphasizes the active and meaningful participation of students in their own learning process. It refers to the extent to which students can take ownership of their learning, make informed decisions, set goals, and engage in self-directed learning. Peer assisted learning and tutorship as an educational approach has and can foster student agency by promoting collaboration, autonomy, and responsibility among students. During the peer assisted learning and tutorship sessions, students often have some degree of autonomy in deciding how to approach the material or solve problems. Thus as the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors engage students, they in the process adapt their learning strategies to suit their own preferences and strengths, promoting a sense of agency in the learning process. This agency can be exercised in nearly every context: moral, social, economic, and creative, making the students well rounded in their approach to life. For example, students need to use a moral agency to help them make decisions that recognise the rights and needs of others, the programme helps the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors achieve long-term goals and overcome adversity. A much spoken about agency in higher education is that of encouraging student voice and integration of that voice in the transformation of the curriculum, as such foundational cognitive, social and emotional skills to contribute to that transformation.

Discussion Summary

The findings are consistent with one of the critical issues on the agenda for teaching and learning, the quality of graduates that universities need to produce, and graduates that are academically and socially responsive. It is in this context that education alignment is fundamental to the student-centered learning agenda. In the context of education, alignment can be broadly defined as the degree to which the components of an education system—such as standards, curricula, assessments, student support and instruction—work together to achieve desired goals.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussions and findings the following recommendations are made:

Promote Peer-Assisted Learning (PAL) Programs: The University needs to encourage the continuation and expansion of PAL programs as they contribute significantly to academic development, especially in relation to small groups' deep learning approaches and improved understanding of course content.

Emphasize Intrinsic Motivation: The need to acknowledge and promote the shift from extrinsic motivators like stipends to intrinsic motivations such as the fulfillment of helping others. This means, encouraging a sense of responsibility and the philosophy of "I am my brother's keeper" to foster a more meaningful engagement.

Leadership Development Opportunities: The need to consider integrating PAL program participation as a valuable criterion for leadership positions within student organizations. However, it addresses concerns about the potential exploitation of PAL participants for political purposes.

Address Emotional Intelligence Needs: The need to recognize the emotional challenges faced by PAL leaders, such as frustration and increased demand during exam periods. This means both the faculties and Coordinators must provide supportive mechanisms and training to enhance their emotional intelligence and coping strategies.

Promote Inclusivity and Diversity: This means emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and diversity within PAL sessions by providing training on handling diverse perspectives and situations, ensuring that PAL leaders can create a respectful and supportive environment for all students.

Address Venue and Timetabling Issues: Recognize the concerns raised about the lack of support from subject lecturers regarding venues and timetabling. This means there is a need to explore ways to collaborate with academic staff to address these issues and ensure that PAL leaders receive the necessary support.

CONCLUSION

The establishment of peer assisted learning and tutorship programs has been found to be advantageous for both the students receiving support and the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors. It is important to note that based on the unique experiences and motives of the peer assisted learning leaders and tutors themselves, the effectiveness and influence of the program on peer tutors may differ. However, ultimately, taking part as peer supported learning leaders and tutors offers a variety of worthwhile advantages that support their academic and personal development.

As a result, the authors advise that future studies should go more deeply into the procedures and tactics used within the program in order to comprehend the elements influencing competency growth. The study must be repeated in various situations and with greater sample numbers, according to the report, to improve the body of data. The authors point out that a lot of studies looking at tutoring and peer-assisted learning methods have mostly concentrated on homogeneous groups. They emphasize the need for research that includes diverse populations, such as students with learning disabilities, and students from different and ethnic backgrounds.

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