

# Section 2

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## What is Peer group Education?

### Definitions

*'Peer group. Technically a peer group is any collectivity in which the members share some common characteristics, such as age or ethnicity. It most commonly refers to age groups in general, but more specifically to adolescent groups where members are closely bound together by youth culture. Adolescent peer groups tend to have: (1) a high degree of social solidarity, (2) hierarchical organisation, (3) a code which rejects, or contrasts with, adult values and experience. From an adult perspective, peer groups are often deviant because delinquency is supported by the rewards of group membership.'* (A peer is a member of a peer group.)

(Abercrombie, 1988)

*'Peer group education is a method of information transference or role modeling where a particular type of behaviour is promoted or information transferred. The peer educators closely match the target group in some manner; whether it is by age, sexuality, gender, etc.'*

(Brammer/Walker 1995)

Within this publication we have focused on work with young people between the ages of 14 and 20 years, although for many peer group education and peer led programmes of young people taking part ages, do vary enormous.

### Young people as educators

Young people are often portrayed in a negative light, as trouble makers, as instigators and aggressors, the causes of many social problems. By giving young people opportunities to create their own programmes of education and information, qualities like commitment, loyalty and idealism can be engendered.

Peer group education programmes enable young people to deal with problems that affect them. The process can be partly social, establishing forums for young people to explore new frontiers, helping to solve problems and let people in power gain an understanding of the point of view of young people.

Peer group pressure is traditionally seen as a negative pressure on young people, where young people 'learn their bad habits like drug taking and smoking'.

To use such dynamics in a positive manner is the challenge of peer education.

*People say there is a little racist hidden in every human being. I say; if that's a fact some people exaggerate. Most of the racists in my town seem to have their own reasons for being who they are and most of the reasons are stupidity and envy.*

Rene Maarlain, 21 years, Spain



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*'A peer who understands a teen's fierce need for independence and maturity, and can temper those needs with responsibility and thoughtfulness is in a crucial position to correct misinformation and shape group values without losing credibility among youth, adolescents can be extremely influential in shaping the behaviour and values of their friends, particularly in risk taking situations.'*

(Centre for Population Options, USA, 1993).

For many young people it is their peer group that influences values and behaviours. Peer led methods have been around for many centuries in many different forms, from the writing of Aristotle to the eighteenth century monitorial systems which were popular in Europe. Many have noted the benefits of working with children and young people in an educational setting, whether formally or informally, **helping them to help themselves**.

We know that social or peer groups play an important part in the socialisation of the young. During adolescence peer groups can play an increasingly influential role in a young person's life. Certainly the average child spends a larger portion of time with peers than with his or her parents particularly during adolescence. J. Root in an Educational Research article entitled "The Importance of Peer Groups", claimed that because peer groups matter to children they also matter to their education. He argues for the recognition of peer groups as an integral part of learning strategies. It is because of this empathy and similar life experiences peer educators have a distinct advantage over their professional counterparts in informing and educating.

Within DOMINO we explore the many issues raised within peer group education; about control of the young people involved in peer group programmes; their relationships to adults as teachers, trainers or coaches; the partnerships developed between youth and community workers as leaders or coaches, and the rationale behind developing such programmes. These sections are illustrated by examples of good practice. Practical exercises and games are included which aim to help those wishing to establish programmes and develop existing work with young people.

### ***A glimpse at the history of peer education***

As well as the writings of Aristotle in Ancient Greece, Dr Andrew Bell developed one of the earliest documented examples of a peer education approach with his monitorial system in a Madras school in India. Like Bell, Joseph Lancaster later identified peer led approaches in the late eighteenth century through school programmes where under a carefully planned supervision, disadvantaged young people taught reading, writing and arithmetic to their peers. Lancaster and his contemporaries identified these early monitorial systems as

*'value for money, a way of maximising the use of their limited resources'*

(Lancaster, 1805).



*'The dissemination of the Bell-Lancaster system through Denmark, England, France, Greece, Italy, Norway and Sweden constitutes one of the most amazing educational movements of all time... It's success was due to it's comparative effectiveness at a time when cheapness was the prime consideration.'*

(Pollard, 1982).

Lilya Wagner in her comprehensive history of peer teaching examines the development of peer education acknowledging the work of the Swiss educationalist Pestalozzi working with orphan children in Switzerland. Pestalozzi developed a more informal approach to peer teaching than Bell and Lancaster had.

*'... drilling one child through an artificial machinery of lifeless tasks and the child so drilled they employ to drill others in the same manner and by the same means.'*

(Leitch, 1876).

An 1831 American report numbered almost two thousand monitorial schools each in Denmark, Sweden, Spain and Sardinia. The Dutch had earlier developed a system which was taken on by the English. This time of reform and development within the educational authorities of nineteenth century Europe influenced greatly the development of educational theory in other parts of the world.

Lancaster and others describe how these early formal systems were beneficial to the monitors themselves.

*'Lancaster was shrewdly aware of the stimulating effect of being a monitor not only on a boy's learning but also on his behaviour. 'Lively, active tempered boys are the most frequent transgressors of good order; and the most difficult to reduce the reason; the best way to form them is by making monitors of them.'*

(Goodland, 1979)

In the late 1950's, peer education had a revival in Europe, Canada, USA and Australia and continued to be pursued as an effective approach to communicating and education sometimes hard to reach young people with messages about health, welfare and social issues. At the University of Minnesota (USA) in the early 60's, programmes were developed to help minority youth learn about science and mathematics, this and others in Chicago and Sacramento identified the role of the adult as a distant coach in the peer education process.

It is well documented that peer led methodology reduces the number of barriers between teacher and taught where young people are trained to be the educators. Paulo Freire the South American educationalist, highlighted what he called 'teacher/student contradiction' (Freire 1972), which can act as barriers to learning and development. Peer led approaches whether in formal settings or in very informal ways can - if planned and resourced - affect attitudes and behaviour positively to a great extent.

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*I find it very evil and racist,  
when people make remarks  
about me and my boyfriend  
who's name is Sagil and from  
Gambia. Some of my 'close'  
friends have giggled sometimes  
when the subject 'cruised'  
around me and Sagil. I believe  
that is prejudice and rac-  
ism at the same time.*

Tanya Klikkenborg,  
18 years, Danish

In recent years, peer education has been widely applied to many issues particularly those around HIV disease, AIDS prevention, sexual education, drug abuse and smoking cessation. On the African and Asian continents limited resources and the need for educational approaches to stem the AIDS pandemic has led to many programmes which build on the energy and efficacy of young people. In Europe, USA and Australia the development of peer group education in the context of health is well documented, reaching young people who are not in communication with health and education authorities.

## **Rationale of Peer Education**

There are many reasons why peer group education is used as an educational approach to deal with specific issues. Commentators suggest a contemporary rationale for using peer education (Manchester University), looking at four main points:

1. Efficacy
2. Communication
3. Cost effectiveness
4. Empowerment

### **1. Efficacy**

Young people are ready made experts, may have a perspective on the issues as they affect young people in similar situations and can often 'make things happen', if encouraged and resourced.

### **2. Communication**

Young people can be ready made role models as members of their peer group they will have the potential to determine effective styles and approaches. This may be through workshops and games, music and mass media, discussion and story telling. *Young people will be best placed to devise such methods.*

### **3. Cost-effectiveness**

Where resources are limited and large numbers have to be reached peer group education can have a multiplier effect. Such programmes can also have informal, knock-on or cascade effects, creating 'buzz' in the local community.



## 4. Empowerment

If carefully planned young people can control the process of education and information exchange. This will depend on in which setting a programme is operating. Peer group education can help to foster youth participation in programmes of formal and informal education.

### Peer education, peer learning and peer led approaches

There is clearly many different approaches to peer group education, in the following a descriptions distinction is made between different settings. For some a more formal educational approach may be appropriate whilst for another programme young people may be involved on a grass roots level.

Peer group education can be applied in different educational settings. There is not 'the only way' to do it - diversity of approaches exists.

Educational approaches both within and outside schools are tremendously important. How we refer to these approaches depends a lot on context. And it is also "true" that one can find more formal methods in out-of-school education, (a lecture, an input, written exercises...) just as more informal methods can also be found in schools, (working in project groups, using the local environment...). When **DOMino** was written in 1994-95, we were used to differentiate between formal and informal education – it was relatively rare to talk of "non-formal education/learning". The debate has moved on, to the extent that the European Youth Forum recently issued a policy paper called "Youth organisations as non-formal educators – recognising our role" (November 2003). Informal education is now more often referred to when talking about non-planned learning situations: in the family, on a bus, talking with friends. Still, for this edition we have chosen to leave the terminology as it was. You might find it refreshing!

Challenges facing educational systems today and the need for complementarity between formal and non-formal education are outlined in the Compass chapter 5's section on Education.

For the facilitation of the planning and to avoid confusion, three general pillars can help to draw a dividing line:

#### 1. Peer group education in formal educational settings

Peer group education in schools is initiated by the teachers with the aim to subsequently give over the responsibility of the programme to the students and pupils. During the process

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of the programme the role of the teacher changes from initiator and teacher to facilitator and consultant, in the ideal case, the teacher should eventually become redundant for the succession of the programme.

In methodological terms, this could mean teacherless groups, pairing of students, proctoring (Keller, 1968) and the opening of formal educational settings to a wider public.

(Project reference in section 5: The mediation programme in schools of the Jugendbildungswerk Offenbach, Germany)

## ***2. Peer group education in informal educational settings***

Peer group education in 'out-of-school education' is relevant for youth organisations, youth services, youth agencies and youth and social work in general. The aim to give young people the responsibility for the education of other young people can be achieved by the continuity of the out-of-school sector. The challenge to the adults in out-of-school education is the step by step retreat out of peer group education programmes. Working towards loss of 'control' and allowing for action alongside the structured programmes of organisation, agencies and services. Peer group education programmes can reach out to a wider public than only to the "members" of the organisation and institutions and can therefore bring about synthesis and enrichment.

(Project reference in section 5: The prejudice reduction programme of NCBI, the programme of RFSL in Stockholm).

## ***3. Peer group education initiated by young people - grass roots initiatives***

Young people feel the urge to gain the support of other young people for a subject or issue they consider important or feel strongly about. Consequently they organise action with multiplying effects. This is the 'pure' peer group education without any adult influence, peer led from the beginning to the end of a 'project'.

(Project reference in section 5: The Stop the Violence programme in Denmark, The Guardian Angels)

