



REVIEW ARTICLE / DERLEME YAZISI

A Review of the Literature on the Influence of Peer Support Programs on Student Mental Health and Well-Being

Akran destek programlarının öğrenci ruh sağlığı ve refahı
üzerindeki etkisine ilişkin literatürün gözden geçirilmesi

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Abstract:

This literature review investigates the transformative role of peer support programs focusing on student mental health and well-being. These programs offer significant advantages to domestic and international students by fostering emotional support and a sense of community. Additionally, studies show that they improve self-confidence, lessen stress and anxiety, and foster a supportive environment. Existing literature emphasizes the importance of peer support programs through strengths in empirical evidence, diverse settings, and multifaceted approaches. However, gaps in inclusivity, underexplored mechanisms, and the need for longitudinal research persist. The practical implications center on the distribution of resources, consciousness, accessibility, and continuous adaptation. Educational institutions can help students learn better and achieve academic success and emotional growth by paying attention to these implications.

Keywords: Peer support programs, social support, university students, mental health, well-being

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Öz:

Bu literatür taraması, öğrencinin ruh sağlığı ve refahına odaklanan akran destek programlarının dönüştürücü rolünü araştırıyor. Bu programlar, duygusal desteği ve topluluk duygusunu geliştirerek yerli ve yabancı öğrencilere önemli avantajlar sunmaktadır. Ek olarak araştırmalar, bunların özgüveni artırdığını, stresi ve kaygıyı azalttığını ve destekleyici bir ortam geliştirdiğini gösteriyor. Mevcut literatür ampirik kanıtların güçlü yönleri, farklı ortamlar ve çok yönlü yaklaşımlar yoluyla akran destek programlarının önemini vurgulamaktadır. Ancak kapsayıcılık konusundaki boşluklar, yeterince araştırılmamış mekanizmalar ve boylamsal araştırmalara duyulan ihtiyaç devam etmektedir. Pratik çıkarımlar kaynakların dağıtımını, bilinç, erişilebilirlik ve sürekli uyum üzerinde yoğunlaşmaktadır. Eğitim kurumları bu sonuçlara dikkat ederek öğrencilerin daha iyi öğrenmelerine, akademik başarıya ve duygusal gelişime ulaşmalarına yardımcı olabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Akran destek programları, sosyal destek, üniversite öğrencileri, ruh sağlığı, iyi oluş

Introduction

The well-being and mental health of university students must be taken into consideration for them to have a successful educational experience. However, many challenges such as academic demands, the transition to higher education, and the numerous stressors that students face can all have an impact on their mental health (Campbell et al., 2022; Matsuo et al., 2022). It becomes important for universities to provide support programs to help students at this stage, one of which is the peer support program. This literature investigates how peer support programs influence student mental health and well-being, focusing on their ability to reduce stress and anxiety while also enabling a supportive academic environment.

Peer support programs have recently gained recognition as an effective way to address the mental health challenges that students face in higher education (John et al., 2018; Richard et al., 2022; Simmons et al., 2023). These programs are intended to provide students with support, guidance, and mentorship. Peer support programs aim to create a sense of belonging and reduce the isolation that can often accompany higher education by building connections and promoting experience sharing (Suresh et al., 2021).

According to Winzer et al. (2018), improving students' mental health and well-being benefits educational institutions, society at large, and their own personal development. Therefore, it is imperative to explore and understand the potential of peer support programs as a valuable resource for students to navigate the difficulties of higher education while maintaining their mental health and well-being.

The purpose of this review is to provide a comprehensive overview of peer support programs and their influence on student mental well-being. We examine the existing literature to identify how peer support programs enhance student well-being. Therefore, this review seeks to answer the research question – what influence do peer support programs have on students' mental health? Furthermore, the strengths and limitations of the current research will be assessed, highlighting areas where further investigation is warranted.

The methodology employed for this review will be discussed in the subsequent sections, followed by an overview of peer support programs, and the challenges of students in the academic environment and the influence of peer support programs. Finally, we will discuss the implications for educational institutions, policymakers, and the future of student support programs.

Method

Search Strategy

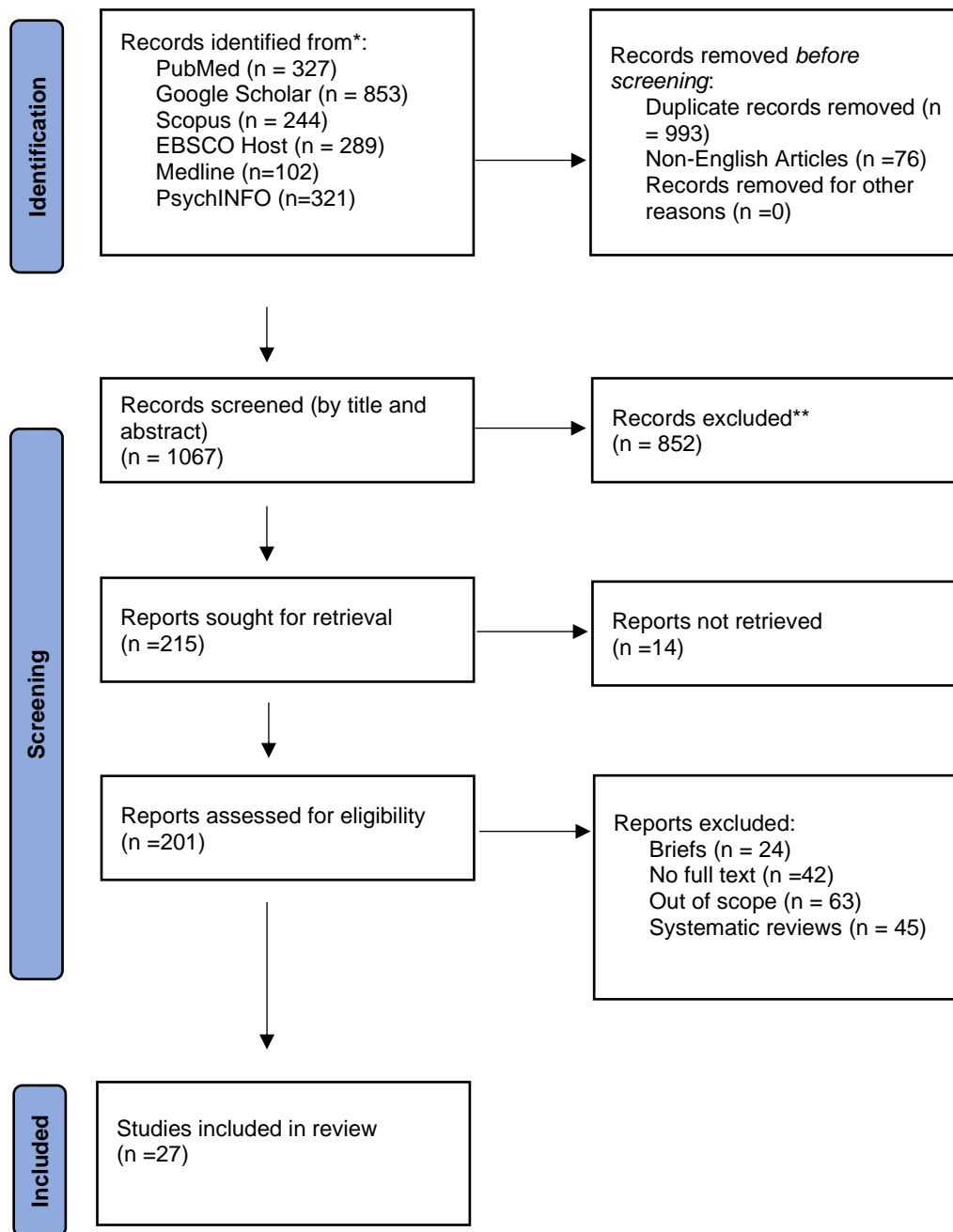
A systematic search was conducted to perform a thorough review of the literature on the influence of peer support programs on the mental health and well-being of students. The following databases were used to find relevant articles: PubMed, Scopus, Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, Medline, and PsycINFO. The results of the search are shown in Figure 1.

Relevant keywords and phrases were combined to create the search terms. Among these are “support for students' mental health,” “peer support for students,” and “support for students' psychological well-being.” The above search terms were applied methodically to all the databases that were chosen as part of an organized search procedure. For every term, separate searches were carried out and then combined to produce possible articles.

Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were used to preserve the quality and relevance of the articles included in this review. The criteria for inclusion were that the article be full text, focused on peer support for students, address the mental, emotional, and psychological health and well-being of university students, be published in English, and be original and peer-reviewed. Non-original research articles, such as review papers and editorials, and articles published in languages other than English were excluded.

A rigorous screening process was used to select the articles. Initial screening was based on the titles and abstracts of the identified articles. The articles that fit the inclusion requirements were retrieved and reviewed thoroughly. All authors worked together to discuss and resolve any discrepancies or doubts about inclusion.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flowchart of the included studies. A total of 27 research articles were included in this review.

Results

Twenty-seven studies on peer support programs and their impact on university students were included in this review. Three studies used mixed methods, 17 were quantitative and seven studies used qualitative methods. The findings reveal that several studies (Altermatt, 2016; Campbell et al., 2022; Hayman et al., 2022; Kaynak, Kaynak & Kocak., 2023; King & Fazel., 2021; Suresh et al., 2021; Worley et al., 2023) have investigated the impact of peer support on students' mental wellbeing with positive findings. This is not surprising since the mental health and well-being of students is a topic of critical concern in universities and higher educational institutions. Peer support programs are

intended to improve relationships and interactions among students and are frequently based on the ideas of social support and peer mentoring (Suresh, 2021). These initiatives give students supervised chances to socialize with classmates, usually emphasizing their academic and personal development. These programs are offered through student organizations, peer mentoring, tutoring, counseling, and other means (Osborn et al., 2022) and the main goals are to help students feel like they belong, offer support, and overcome obstacles they might encounter while pursuing their education.

Students pursuing a higher education are at a time of significant personal growth, academic development, and

exploration. Yet, they face increased stress and unique challenges (Divaris et al., 2008). Suresh et al., (2021) noted that balancing coursework, exams, social life, and self-discovery are some of the challenges that can affect students' mental health. In addition, understanding and addressing student well-being is essential not only for individuals but also for educational institutions seeking to provide a conducive and supportive learning environment.

The influence of peer support programs on students' psychological health and well-being is profound. Research has shown that students who actively engage in peer support programs experience lower stress, anxiety, and isolation (Crisp et al., 2020; Seery et al., 2021; Worley et al., 2023). Manyeruke and Ergun (2022) also stressed the significance of social support in improving the lives of international students. These programs act as a protective factor against mental health challenges, offering a space for students to share their experiences and receive support from peers who may have faced similar issues.

Peer support programs in universities usually involve upper-class students mentoring newcomers, particularly international students and providing academic and personal guidance (Venegas-Mugglu et al., 2021). This mentoring relationship assists students in navigating their academic journey while also providing insights into university life. The function of these mentors builds companionship and trust resulting in a supportive environment for their mentees (Seery et al., 2021).

Furthermore, many peer support programs provide tutoring or study groups, allowing students to improve their academic skills and succeed in their courses (Collier, 2022; Venegas-Muggli et al., 2021). Peers who excel in subjects or courses may volunteer to tutor struggling students. Additionally, study groups facilitate collaborative learning by providing a structured platform for students to collaborate, share knowledge, and tackle academic challenges together (Wilton et al., 2021).

Besides academic support, peer support programs provide a platform for emotional support (Suresh, 2021). Students can discuss their concerns, challenges, and fears openly, which reduces feelings of isolation, anxiety, and stress (Crisp, 2020). As a result, students can express their emotions and receive understanding and encouragement from their peers. Moreover, peer support programs contribute to developing a sense of community on campus. By facilitating interactions among students from diverse backgrounds and academic interests, these programs create a cohesive academic environment. Therefore, students who participate in peer support programs often report feeling more connected to their university, which can be instrumental in reducing isolation. (Osborn et al., 2022).

In addition, peer support benefits students beyond their academics. These programs can improve student's mood, teach life skills such as effective communication, and help them develop problem solving and stress coping skills. As they develop these skills, students become more resilient and better equipped to manage the challenges they encounter not only in their academic journey but also in their future endeavors. The peer mentorship and guidance of these programs also provide help in enhancing students' self-confidence. When students receive personalized advice and mentorship from their peers, they often experience increased self-esteem and self-efficacy

(Richard et al., 2022). This enhanced self-confidence positively influences their overall mental well-being, making them better prepared to face the complexities of academic life.

Discussion

Peer support programs are invaluable resources within educational institutions that offer students support and understanding. Students face several challenges that affect their mental health and well-being. Academic demands, such as rigorous coursework and impending deadlines, can cause stress and anxiety (Alhamed, 2023). These challenges also extend to international students who may face more issues. For them, the transition to university life, frequently away from home, introduces a new set of stressors associated with independence and adjusting to a new environment (Oduwaye et al., 2023). Social pressures, financial constraints, and the uncertainty of prospects all add to the difficulties.

The possibility of isolation is one of the consistent challenges in university experience. Students may find themselves in environments with no familiar support networks, resulting in loneliness. Loneliness, when combined with academic pressure, can result in psychological distress (Diehl et al., 2018; Zahedi et al., 2022) and poor academic performance (Alinejad et al., 2022). Nevertheless, participation in peer support programs has been linked to improved academic performance (Altermatt, 2016; Huang, 2023). Students who participate in these programs and receive guidance and tutoring perform better in their classes. Peer support programs can improve student motivation and engagement in their academic pursuits by instilling a sense of belonging and community.

The prevalence of mental health issues among university students, such as anxiety, depression, and stress, emphasizes the importance of addressing their well-being. Many of the identified studies (Hayman et al., 2022; Manyeruke & Ergun, 2022; Osborn et al., 2022; Suresh et al., 2021; Worley et al., 2023; Wilcox et al., 2005) provide empirical evidence supporting the positive impact of peer support programs on student mental health. These studies used meticulous research methods and statistical analyses, making their findings credible. Although the findings of this review show that peer support programs have a positive influence on student mental health, some studies (Gregoire et al., 2022; John et al., 2018) conclude that there is no evidence to support these claims.

However, to emphasize its importance, peer support programs have been researched in various academic settings, including community colleges and large universities. Local and international students have been involved in these studies (Lee, 2017; Martirosyan et al., 2019; Huang, 2023; Pointon Haas et al., 2023; Suresh et al., 2021). These studies also demonstrate the effectiveness of peer support programs for students from all backgrounds. This diversity of settings offers a broad perspective on the effectiveness of these programs across different student populations.

Implications for Practice

Examining peer support programs and their effects on students' mental health and well-being adds to the body of knowledge in academia. Additionally, this review's

findings indicate the areas where peer support can be improved upon in higher education.

Educational institutions and policymakers can improve peer support programs in several ways. First, they must ensure resource allocation to improve and expand support programs. Funding for mentorship training, additional support personnel, and program development can go a long way to enhance these programs (Osborn et al., 2022). Institutions should invest in comprehensive peer mentor and program coordinator training. This education should cover not only academics but also interpersonal and mental health support skills.

Additionally, different challenges arise when establishing an initiative such as peer support programs (Crisp, 2020). Therefore, monitoring and evaluation should be discussed when creating peer support programs. It is critical to assess these programs regularly and monitoring and evaluation helps to assess and ensure that the objectives of the programs are met (Nkonki-Mandleni, 2023). So, institutions should implement mechanisms to track the effectiveness of these programs for student well-being. These can be done through quantitative and qualitative research methods such as surveys and interviews.

Furthermore, existing mental health and counseling services should be integrated with peer support programs. Collaboration between peer mentors and professional counselors can provide a comprehensive approach to student well-being, with each component complementing the other (Collier, 2017; Colvin & Ashman, 2010). Additionally, institutions should establish efficient referral systems to connect students with more specialized mental health services as needed. They should also recognize that peer support programs must be adaptable and open to change, and student feedback should drive changes to ensure the program remains relevant and valuable.

Finally, recognizing that students' needs vary, institutions should consider tailoring peer support programs to a specific student population. Programs tailored to international students, students with disabilities, or those from underrepresented backgrounds can have a more significant impact (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Peer support programs can improve all aspects of a student's life. Students can connect, learn, and support one another through these structured programs. According to research, peer support programs also appear to lower stress and anxiety, create a positive atmosphere, strengthen coping mechanisms, and boost self-esteem. Nonetheless, there are still gaps and restrictions in the research on peer support initiatives. This literature review demonstrates the need for additional research to meet the varied needs of students. While academic support and mentoring are well-researched components of peer support programs, more research is needed to understand emotional support and personal development fully. Additional considerations include contextual variables, long-term results, and balancing quantitative and qualitative research.

Peer support programs are a promising avenue for improving student mental health and well-being in the academic setting. This review has provided a thorough overview of their influence and practical implications. Leveraging the strengths of these programs while addressing their shortcomings can be critical in improving the development of university students.

Declarations

Ethical Approval and Consent to Participate

There were no human or animal participants in this study and therefore did not require ethical approval.

Publication Permission

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Financing

Not applicable.

Author Contributions

OO and YS contributed to overall writing, analysis, literature search and interpretation. AK was involved in editing, proofreading and interpretation. All authors have read and approved the final version of the article.

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