

EXPLORING A PEER SUPPORTER'S EMOTIONAL GEOGRAPHIES IN SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES (SWD)

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Received: 2025-08-12

Accepted: 2025-10-26

Published: 2025-12-10

Abstract

This study explores the emotional geography of a peer supporter who assists students with disabilities at Brawijaya University. Data were obtained from a participant at the Disability Service Center (PSLD) with the informed consent of the individual involved. The data were collected over three months through in-depth interviews. The analysis draws upon Hargreaves' (2001) framework of five emotional geographies—moral, sociocultural, physical, professional, and political. The study aims to analyze the emotional relationships that emerge during the peer support program organized by PSLD UB in assisting students with disabilities (SWD) as they navigate university life. The findings reveal how a peer supporter contributes to the academic and moral well-being of SWD, not only by providing physical support but also through emotional engagement. Furthermore, the study uncovers how the peer supporter responds to various situations with empathy, resilience, initiative, and responsiveness. These findings highlight the importance of fostering both personal and professional growth among peer supporters to strengthen inclusive practices within higher education environments.

Keywords: *emotional geographies; higher education; peer support; inclusivity; students with disabilities.*

1. Introduction

The government's role in promoting equal access to education is undeniably crucial and plays a significant part in advancing educational development (Oktadiana & Wardana, 2019). This commitment is reflected in Indonesia's strong support for inclusive education, particularly in expanding access to higher education for students with disabilities (SWD). Indonesia's dedication to inclusive learning is evident in the establishment of disability service centers across the country, which serve as proactive initiatives to enhance access and provide comprehensive support for SWD in pursuing higher education.

Many universities in Indonesia have demonstrated their commitment to inclusive education by establishing institutional support systems for students with disabilities. One notable example is Brawijaya University (UB), which has established the Disability Service and Learning Center (Pusat Layanan Disabilitas, or PSLD). The creation of such inclusive learning centers clearly reflects the nation's strong commitment to ensuring that students with disabilities are not excluded from opportunities to pursue higher education. Furthermore, according to Wibowo & Muin (2018), the adoption of inclusive education in

Indonesian schools represents a key initiative to eliminate the exclusion of individuals with disabilities from the educational system.

Despite the availability of institutional support, students with disabilities (SWD) continue to face numerous challenges in navigating academic life. These challenges often stem from changes in support services, legal rights, and the shift in responsibility from parents to the students themselves (Madaus, 2005). Furthermore, SWDs often struggle to develop their personal and social identities, as they continue to require assistance and adaptation during their transition to university life (Goode, 2007). Lee (2014) explained that students with disabilities are usually aware of their rights and expect the same support they received in primary and secondary education, but they may not be familiar with independence in college and have struggled to manage their college studies. Additionally, universities have to deal with the threat to SWD by making friends who are quite reluctant because of the feeling of exclusion and rejection.

To alleviate some of these challenges, Brawijaya University, has opened recruitment for students who are willing to enroll as peer supporters. Peer support refers to the social and emotional assistance offered by someone who identifies as having personal experience with mental health, social, psychological, or medical challenges (Fortuna et al., 2022; Moores, 2024). Disability Service and Learning Center or PSLD Brawijaya University's voluntary program is depicted as a humanity-based programme. These volunteers are not compensated financially; their motivation is rooted in compassion, social responsibility, and a belief in equal access to education. Research shows that people's motivation to participate in community work is largely unrelated to the type, intensity, or duration of the work they do (Thoits, 2021). Beyond the external reasons, peer supporters also cited reasons for their advantages, like meeting new people, becoming more engaged, giving back to the university, and building skills such as mentoring, communication, confidence, and leadership (Muldoon, 2008). As they are firsthand students handling the SWD, they can also promote inclusivity towards their surroundings.

Nevertheless, not only do SWD face obstacles, but also the peer supporters themselves. During their volunteer work as peer supporters, they experienced many struggles, including how far peer supporters could be beneficial to SWD (Duong et al., 2023). This might evoke an emotional burden on the peer supporter in carrying out their duties. Introducing a peer-led care planning process enhanced service users' perceptions that their care was more aligned with their individual needs and took into account broader, non-clinical issues, such as housing and employment (Davidson et al., 2012; Moores, 2024). Following this, a peer supporter is not only a friend but also a caregiver, which draws significant emotional geographies when carrying out their duties.

There is some previous research in the literature concerning studies of students with disabilities. The research conducted by Sari et al. (2017) explored how peer support impacts university students' English language achievement. Using a pretest-posttest experimental design with 800 students near Istanbul, 400 participated in a peer support program, while 400 followed traditional lessons. Next, Fang et al., also examined how organizations that support people with disabilities work with self-advocacy groups for people with disabilities from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds (CALD) to ensure high-quality and sustainable support under the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) and provide self-help groups to assist. Another study by Moores (2024) used narrative inquiry along with thematic and structural analysis to examine the experiences of a peer supporter at universities.

While peer support programs in educational settings have gained attention recently, existing research has predominantly focused on descriptive accounts of peer supporters' experiences in handling students' disability. Over the past years, previous studies on SWD have been conducted. However, little attention was paid to the emotional geography experienced by a peer supporter. On this basis, this article aims to explore the emotional geography of peer supporter in managing disabled students during their voluntary work at the Disability Service and Learning Center or PSLD, Brawijaya University.

According to Hargreaves (2001), emotional geography is the pattern of closeness and distance in human interactions that determines the emotions we experience in our relationships with ourselves, with others, and with the world around us. There are five emotional geographies—moral, political, physical, professional, and sociocultural—that influence the emotional interactions and relationships within educational and social contexts. Moral geographies concern the values, care, and ethical responsibilities that shape emotional connections and relationships. Political geographies reflect the influence of power relations, authority, and autonomy on emotional dynamics. Physical geography refers to the impact of spatial and bodily proximity or distance in shaping feelings of connection or detachment. Professional geographies involve role definitions, institutional expectations, and boundaries that affect emotional expression and engagement. Lastly, sociocultural geographies encompass the influence of cultural norms, social identities, and community values on emotional understanding. These geographies help explain how emotions are not just personal experiences but are shaped by broader social, cultural, and institutional contexts.

The findings of this study might explore the emotional geography of peer supporters during the voluntary work at PSLD Brawijaya University. By examining the experience, affective relationships, emotional dynamics, and professional field in undertaking humanitarian action, the research aims to contribute to inclusive education and the sustainability of voluntary support systems in higher education.

2. Literature Review

Over the past years, previous studies on SWD have been conducted. Most of them examined how SWD navigates challenges, especially in the education environment. While peer support programs in educational settings recently have raised people's eyebrows, existing research has predominantly focused on descriptive accounts of peer supporters' experiences of handling disabilities students. Little attention was given to the emotional geography experienced by peer disability supporters, even though their role was crucial for SWD—not only as companions, but also as sources of academic support.

The research conducted by Sari et al., (2017) explored how peer support impacts university students' English language achievement. This study used a pretest-posttest experimental design with 800 students near Istanbul; 400 participated in a peer support program, while 400 followed traditional lessons to reveal the effect of peer support both as supporter and as assistance. As a result, there was a significant increase in the achievement (pretest-posttest) “assistant and not assistant students” and “supported and not supported students.” In addition, meaningful differences were depicted in the posttest results of experimental and control groups who are considered to be whether successful students or unsuccessful students. However, a significant difference was observed only in the assessments of the “supported” students. The “successful” students who participated in the experiment were not neither positively nor negatively.

Another study from Fang et al., (2022) examined how organizations that support people with disabilities work with self-help groups for people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds (CALD) to ensure high-quality and sustainable support within the NDIS (National Disability Insurance Scheme). Working with three organizations that support people with disabilities in Sydney, these organizations have established and support various self-advocacy groups for people with disabilities and their families from different cultural backgrounds. The four participant self-advocacy groups for people with disabilities with which these organizations collaborate. These four groups mainly support Australian Chinese people with disabilities and their families. As a result, self-help groups for people with disabilities are valuable resources that provide support for culturally sensitive management of disability and need external support from the whole community.

Another study by Moores (2024) employed narrative inquiry along with thematic and structural analysis to examine the experiences of peer supporters at universities. This research examined the role of the peer supporter beyond being only a companion. They also could share experience and how it contributed to the therapeutic relationship, combat despair and isolation, and provide them with insight into the systems that students must follow to achieve mental well-being and academic success. Another benefit was promoting mutual wellness and growth. The role of peer support influenced the approachment to the situation and reluctance to seek additional help, as well as bringing them emotional satisfaction from helping others.

3. Research Method

This research employs narrative inquiry, a long-established method that may seem novel for various reasons. It's widely recognized that people experience life and express those experiences through storytelling (Clandinin, 2006). It is seen in different ways: as a "story," a "way of understanding and making sense of experiences," and more recently, as a "research method." Often, it functions as all of these at once (Barrett & Stauffer, 2009). This study involved one peer supporter currently serving as a peer supporter from Disability Service Center (PLD) Brawijaya University. This participant was selected through purposive sampling due to extensive direct experience in supporting students with disabilities, both inside and outside the classroom.

Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the study. Valen (Pseudonym) is an EFL student majoring in English Language Education who is now sitting in the seventh semester. She provides assistance to those SWD who take English courses as English department students, English language education and SWD students taking English for Specific Purpose. Our investigation focused on Valen's emotional geography when serving as peer supporter for SWD, which displayed many truths, facts, and experiences. As a result, we looked for the subjectivity of meanings drawn from the participant's lived experiences in this inquiry. The participant was fully informed about the research objectives and the intended use of the data, and provided informed consent prior to participation. The participant's identity was anonymized, and all personal information was excluded to ensure confidentiality. Data collection was conducted through an online chat interview using a series of semi-structured questions. The interview focused on the participant's experiences as a peer support volunteer, particularly in relation to the five dimensions of emotional geography identified by Hargreaves (2001): moral, physical, sociocultural, political, and professional geographies.

Data analysis followed a thematic narrative approach. The thematic approach focuses on topics within the story to give the narrative direction and purpose (Hargood, et al., 2008). First, interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded openly to identify repeated words, phrases, and meanings related to the five emotional geographies. Second, these codes were grouped into broader themes reflecting patterns of emotional experience within the context of peer support. Lastly, the themes were interpreted in light of Hargreaves' framework to better understand how peer helpers navigate the emotional geographies of supporting students with disabilities in university life.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results

The finding deals with the description of the emotional geography of a peer supporter who accompanies SWD open up novel knowledge about managing inclusive education and navigating the obstacles during the activity. This is implemented in five emotional geographies according to Hargreaves (2001).

4.1.1 Moral Geographies: 'I was interested in disability issues in my surroundings'

Having humanity naturally comes from within, without enforcement from any party. Not many people have a big heart and are involved in someone's academic life. A person with a strong sense of common humanity does not consider themselves alone in life, but rather realizes that similar challenges occur to other people (Kotera et al., 2024). It means that as a peer supporter, she understands that the struggles of SWDs do not only belong to her but also to other people who are likely in the same boat, which makes them connected. It is depicted in the statement:

Excerpt: I feel a great responsibility when I have to ensure that the students I accompany can follow the learning as well as possible. Having a role as a volunteer is crucial because I become a medium during learning activities.

Carrying a great responsibility to provide help for SWD sometimes puts a peer supporter under pressure. As a debut experience, a peer supporter wondered whether she would be able to perform to the best of her ability in this voluntary activity. In fact, during her duties, she really enjoys her work serving the SWD. The relationship between peer supporter and the SWD is mutual, which creates new nuance in the friendship. A peer supporter has expressed great confidence in her role, describing personal benefits, stating she is not hindered in completing her own work, and wanting to take on this role again in the future (Carter, 2017). Once, when the author asked about the feeling of enjoyment of accompanying the SWD, the peer supporter gave an unexpected statement.

Excerpt: Yes, because I can better understand what my friends with disabilities feel. At first, I was worried about whether I could help them properly, but as time went by, I felt happy and grateful because there were so many things to learn. I enjoy being with my disability friend. If I had another chance, I would like to be a peer supporter again.

The expression of gratitude, enjoyment, and satisfaction as a companion indicated the fulfillment of how this program succeeded in shaping a positive impact from the peer-supporter side. Her participation is valued by orientation, anticipated enjoyment, relationships, and personal growth (Carter, et al., 2019). Being a peer supporter is a priceless life experience because of the dedication to humanity.

4.1.2 Physical Geographies: “We often hang out together or do online chatting sometimes outside the class.”

The statement above was uttered by the participant in her effort to build a relationship with SWD. Physical geography influences social interactions that are limited by factors such as emotional closeness that occurs in relationships (Ubaidillah et al., 2023) between peer supporter and SWD. Understanding the role of a peer supporter in disability services, whether it is casual conversations outside the class or spending time together, a peer supporter can better understand the needs of SWD, fostering a trusting and rapport relationship (Calhoun, 2018). Casual conversation contributes to strengthening the bond and breaking the barrier. However, there is still a gap in conversation, such as the distinction of the way it is; inevitably, the peer supporter has to deal with it. This emphasizes the importance of a peer supporter being adaptable in interaction. For blind students, verbal explanations replace visual cues, so peer supporter needs to develop more descriptive and imaginative ways of communicating. For deaf students, the inability to use sign language creates a significant communication gap. In such cases, reliance on written or typed communication becomes essential. This story is elaborated in the following excerpt:

Excerpt: The differences I encountered were more related to how communication was adapted to the type of disability. For example, when helping blind students, I needed to explain visual things in more detail verbally. When helping deaf students, the challenge was greater because communication could be disrupted, especially since I was not yet proficient in sign language. I usually used written or typed media so that we could still communicate effectively.

Peer supporter presence goes beyond academic assistance, but also creates a secure feeling for SWD. By participating in informal interactions, a peer supporter can provide an interpersonal learning environment that helps share feelings of connectedness between the peer supporter and SWD. It is vital to make sure the SWD understands throughout the learning process. Besides being an academic supporter, a peer supporter also acts as a bridge in the class, for instance, providing help, so that the knowledge is successfully transferred to SWD. Once there was a problem in using media learning, the peer supporter assisted it by explaining orally. This story was depicted in this excerpt:

Excerpt: I rarely interacted with the SWD's classmates, but sometimes I asked them about assignments and things like that. One of the experiences I remember most clearly was when a lecturer used Kahoot in class, and the blind student I was assisting had difficulty following along due to accessibility issues, and the rapidly appearing questions were too quick to be explained verbally.

In this case, the peer supporter assists the SWD with the difficulties in learning activities because they play an invaluable role in helping teachers integrate students with disabilities into the class community. The presence of a peer supporter helps SWD expand opportunities and enhance their confidence and self-esteem (Hillier et al., 2019). They assist in translating it into easier-to-understand materials so the SWD can keep up with academic progress. Therefore, it does not make them feel excluded in the class because of the academic challenges.

4.1.3 Sociocultural Geographies: Sometimes I feel “unseen,” in the sense that people around me do not notice my role.

The role of a peer supporter carries a great responsibility, so feelings exist for this field were depicted in her strong desire and passion to participate in every activity (Ward &

Greene, 2018). Dedicating herself to helping SWD navigate their university life is something incredible because it is related to humanity and responsibility. Thus, she hit obstacles in the middle of her duties sometimes. One of them is accessibility issues, such as learning facilities, which could hinder SWD's full participation in university life. Moreover, the diversity of learning styles necessitates a flexible and personalized approach to support. By engaging in open dialogue with the SWD's they assist, a peer supporter can construct adaptive strategies that respond to unique needs as they can be effective in promoting employability and social skills in a work-based learning environment (Athamanah, 2017). These are elaborated in this story:

Excerpt: "There are several challenges, such as learning facilities that are not yet fully accessible and differences in learning styles. I usually overcome these challenges by discussing directly with the students I accompany, trying to understand their needs, and adjusting my assistance to their circumstances.

Besides the accessible facilities, Brawijaya University, as one of the inclusive universities, has committed to fully supporting SWD learning, including the teaching and learning staff. It is essential to provide them with a solid foundation of basic facts, not only because it is necessary to begin addressing inclusive issues in meaningful ways, but also because it empowers them to make greater efforts to improve the lives and outcomes of students with disabilities (Murray et al., 2008). Lecturers are already accustomed to peer supporter presence in the class to accompany the SWD. Thus, the learning activity will be held inclusively in recognition of that acknowledgement. These sociocultural aspects can be regarded in this excerpt:

Excerpt: Usually, lecturers already know that I am from PSLD because when they take attendance, they can see which students in the class have disabilities, and they already understand that there is usually a peer supporter present.

In the midst of peer supporter humanity duties, choosing half of university life as a peer supporter could be an emotional journey. The motives of a peer supporter who joins voluntarily vary; one of them is to gain knowledge about inclusivity. The benefits of voluntary work have a great impact on the SWD, but also provide opportunities for a peer supporter to flourish. She gains knowledge about how inclusivity must be executed, especially at a university. Direct engagement with SWD about how to navigate academic and social life amid physical limitations provides valuable insights and contributes to broadening their social horizons. Despite the advantages, time management sometimes becomes a problem, but the peer supporter believes that this role has a worthwhile outcome for future experience. It is stated in this excerpt:

Excerpt: The most valuable lesson is that I can meet and learn directly from the experiences of students with disabilities, and understand the importance of inclusivity. Indeed, it can be difficult at times, especially when it comes to time management. But that does not really matter because the experience gained is invaluable.

4.1.4 Professional Geographies: "I always maintain boundaries between my role as a friend and my responsibility as a companion."

A common way of expressing the idea of a peer supporter is professional in her approach while maintaining friendliness, rather than being friends who happen to act professionally (Scott, 2011). These two things are distinct, considering that a peer supporter is a friendly professional, not a professional friend; therefore, boundaries are established to manage sustainable voluntary activity. The boundary in friendship is important, as she can

protect individuals from the problems associated with seeking support from a friend and prioritizing self-preservation over her relationship (Johnson, 2022). In the class, a peer supporter carries out her duties as accountably as possible because assisting the SWD with academic difficulties has been the main goal of being a peer supporter. She is also responsible for delivering accurate and reliable academic assistance, such as taking notes or the main points of the class. Her role as a volunteer is structured to maintain sustainability, not only in the quality of academic support but also in emotional boundaries that prevent academic confusion for SWD. It is stated in this excerpt:

Excerpt: I usually take notes on the key points during class. Suppose the students I assist do not understand the material, and I do not understand. In that case, I will help them find additional references or ask other friends who understand better to provide a more accurate explanation.

Regarding the academic timetable, a peer supporter who accompanies SWD has to adapt quickly to unexpected changes in the academic activities. If a lecture makes sudden changes, such as altering the schedule, a peer supporter has to ensure that support for SWD is not interrupted. She would ask other volunteers to find a substitute. This effort not only demonstrates the responsibility and commitment of a peer supporter, but also highlights the flexibility and cooperation of the peer support role in political geography. Peer support services still prioritize her academic responsibility. She must be flexible and adaptable to ensure program success. As organizers, PSLD is committed to continually improving its services to provide a comfortable and safe space both for peer supporters and SWD. The schedule of peer support activities is adapted to accommodate academic schedules, ensuring that peer supporters' learning activities are not disrupted. It is illustrated in this excerpt:

Excerpt: Yes, especially when there were sudden changes to my lecturer's schedule. At that time, I had to find a replacement for my classmates myself by contacting other volunteers.

4.1.5 Political Geographies: “As far as I know, there is no official policy regarding academic relief.”

At the first registration, PSLD, as the organizing party, did not announce any financial benefit in peer supporter activity. This approach ensures the loyalty of a peer supporter, who genuinely dedicates herself to the service center built upon humanity and empathy. However, at the end of her contract, she will receive an honorarium. Furthermore, there are also opportunities to serve as sign language interpreters at particular events. This story was an elaboration of this excerpt:

Excerpt: The benefits for the assistants from the institution are usually in the form of an honorarium. In addition, as far as I know, after becoming a companion in PLD, there are also opportunities to undertake off-campus tasks, such as becoming a JBI (sign language interpreter) at selected events.

PSLD is also responsible for providing quality peer support to assist SWD in the practical field. As an organization, PSLD is committed to continually improving its services to provide a comfortable and safe space for SWD. Therefore, PSLD gives a training class to equip new peer supporters. This training aims to prepare the peer supporters to be more patient, accepting, and empathetic, and also provides practical tips (Nicholson et al., 2022) to support her in the duties. Furthermore, training or preparation programs, in terms of the type, content, and quality, will provide a better understanding of how training can

contribute to sustaining peer support initiatives and encouraging her participation. It is depicted in this excerpt:

Excerpt: After registering, we got training from PSLD to get an understanding of disabilities, ethics, and practice of peer support

4.2 Discussion

As a peer supporter for disability, it is very possible to find obstacles as well as opportunities during duties. Adaptation skill is crucial in this performance because one has to adjust to different learning styles. In the class, a peer supporter is a bridge between the lecturer and the SWD to convey the material and ensure the SWD understands the lectures. Adjustment also occurs in the way a peer supporter communicates. A peer supporter does not handle only one disabled student, but different types of disabilities. For instance, when assisting a deaf student, a peer supporter kindly uses sign language or even uses WhatsApp to break the language barrier. Another issue is the time commitment, which requires being accustomed to changes in the lecturer's schedule and being quick to find a replacement. Despite the challenges during the duties, a peer supporter also learns great lessons as she is the first person engaging with SWD in the class. The primary advantage of peer support is its positive impact on the quality of life of vulnerable individuals, characterized by an improvement in emotional, social, and physical well-being, self-confidence, resilience, and the development and application of effective coping strategies (Mikolajczak et al., 2023). Amid the struggle for voluntary work, there remains significant potential for growth and development. PSLD has paved the way for the volunteer to become a sign language interpreter, so that she can explore the skills outside the campus. This reflects the positive effects of the techniques on her well-being and expresses interest in applying the skill both on a personal and professional level (Kane et al., 2024). Being a peer supporter also improves her social functioning and overall satisfaction with life through the shared experiences and mutual understanding inherent in peer relationships. It can also promote the development of cooperation, shared responsibility, and commitment among students, which are the most important aspects of the community (Meltzoff, 1994; Almulla, 2018).

According to Fortuna et al., 2022, the peer's program has resulted in an increase of self-esteem and self-efficacy, a sense of control, empowerment, hope, confidence in the possibility of changing one's own life, a sense of belonging, social support, participation in self-management, services, care, and community life, as well as improved social functioning, quality of life, and life satisfaction. Based on the findings, the peer's program has succeeded in pushing her to be more confident, as she is the key to this work. In this case, she gains personal development during her volunteer work at PSLD Brawijaya University. Accompanying and supporting the SWD in academic difficulties has shaped her point of view about inclusivity in higher education. It enhances the care and humanity of the "marginalized" people in a community and uplifts them to be seen. Involving students as a peer supporter in universities encourages the cooperation, shared responsibility, and commitment that are essential for a thriving university community. This program not only improves the well-being of those involved but also provides students with essential skills for their personal and professional future. At the end of the mentoring program, she reported feeling stronger, both from her own perspective and from the surrounding perspective. She feels more confident about her abilities and her capacity to achieve future goals (Krisi & Nagar, 2021).

5. Conclusion

Peer support programs have a well-documented positive impact on quality of life, particularly for SWD in universities. The five emotional geographies of Hargreaves, including moral, sociocultural, physical, professional, and political geographies, really shape the point of view of how a peer supporter manages a disabled student. It creates certain emotions and bonds the relationship between them during the voluntary program. The findings support the view that university support is beneficial to both recipient and provider, as it contributes to an inclusive academic environment and equips volunteers with transferable skills that are valuable for their future careers.

From a development perspective, the program has a lot of potential for improvement and expansion. The peer supporter program turns out to have shared mutual benefits, both for SWD and a peer supporter. A peer support gains knowledge and experience in handling disabilities as well as managing herself; meanwhile, SWD is assisted in terms of academic activities. In addition, this peer program indirectly contributes to personal growth as well as highlights the beneficial humanity-based program.

Future studies could examine the long-term effects of collegiate support on both SWD and peer supporters in social contexts, and examine the role of emotional geography in other forms of inclusive practices. It is also significant to explore more about SWD emotional geographies at university. Furthermore, future research will result in great data and broaden the participants. Lastly, as this research is focused on peer supporters' emotional geographies, the next research could undertake the SWD's teachers' emotional geographies, as teachers are key stakeholders of education.

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