Many new and emerging leaders will move into leadership positions in healthcare as experienced leaders retire or move to other positions. These individuals need leadership development that supports them in becoming transformational change leaders. This study explored the topic of peer learning as a leadership development approach in a healthcare setting. The purpose was to better understand the role of peer learning in creating transformational leadership and healthcare change leaders.

This study utilized a qualitative case study approach to explore and understand how peer learning supports leadership development. The study focused on the key learning elements of an 18-month cohort-based formal leadership development program for healthcare professionals, the intent of these elements, and participants’ responses from three cohorts to these learning elements. The Program Facilitator and the participants of the two
active cohorts during the time of study were observed in formal and informal activities. In addition, individual interviews were conducted with 12 individuals, including three from within each of the two active cohorts and three from the previous cohort, the Program Facilitator, Chief Learning Officer and a Senior Leader/Mentor. Training documents and summarized program evaluations were also analyzed.

Overall, participants described aspects of peer learning within the three key elements of the cohort-based leadership program: cohort learning sessions, small group coaching, and action learning projects. This contributed to the sense of community within the program that participants described. Trust, encouragement, and the willingness to share experiences were developed through the key elements of the program. Participants were also able to develop new networks because of the relationships built during the program. Overtime, a sense of belonging was created through the relationships with others going through the program, and transformational learning and leadership were outcomes of the elements of the program. The process included learning from the experiences others shared during the program, as well as developing self-awareness and the ability to reflect. Listening and hearing the experiences and perspectives of others created new awareness and understanding. It was significant to participants that the senior leaders of the healthcare organization were involved in the program, that participants had increased access to them, and that they had personal interactions with them. The amount of time the program involved as well as other work and life pressures were challenging for many of the participants.

This study adds to the body of knowledge about peer learning as a leadership development approach in a healthcare setting.