A Qualitative Study of the Impact of Peer Networks and Peer Support Arrangements in Project Pilot Schools

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Background

Research tells us that making friends can be especially hard for students with significant disabilities. Peer support arrangements and peer networks are evidence-based interventions that involve identifying and equipping a group of peers to provide ongoing support to individual students with significant disabilities in or outside of the classroom. Within inclusive, general education classrooms, peer support arrangements train students (typically 2-3 students) to provide academic and social supports to a student with significant disabilities during ongoing classroom activities.

Beyond the classroom, a group of peers (usually three to six) form a peer network together with a student with a significant disability, to help foster social connections and friendships between classes, at lunch, in extracurricular activities, and/or beyond the school day. School staff facilitate these groups to ensure their success. Note that these programs are a step beyond traditional peer tutoring/ peer buddy models that many schools use, in that they include multiple peers to support each focus student and, more importantly, they facilitate learning and friendship outside the special education classroom in inclusive settings in which the students are learning together.

Multiple studies, including large-scale, group randomized designs have investigated the power of these interventions for students with significant intellectual disabilities (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016), as well as students with autism spectrum disorder (Carter et al., 2017; Hochman, Carter, Bottema-Beutel, Harvey, & Gustafson, 2015). Benefits to focus students have included increased opportunities for social interaction and friendships, enhanced opportunities to practice critical social and communication competencies, increased achievement of social/communicative IEP goals (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2016; Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011), and in the case of peer support arrangements, increased academic engagement (Carter et al., 2016). Students without disabilities have reported they themselves have benefitted from being part of a peer network, that they have developed new friendships that sometimes extend beyond regular school activities, and that their understanding of individual differences and sensitivity to the needs of their classmates with disabilities have increased as a result of participating in peer networks and/ or peer support arrangements (Asmus et al., 2017; Carter et al., 2011).

Based on these evidence-based practices, the KY Peer Support Network Project was funded by the Commonwealth Council on Developmental Disabilities (CCDD) in 2014 to work with schools throughout the state in implementing peer networks and peer support arrangements. To determine the overall impact of the project, and develop recommendations for sustaining this work in Kentucky schools, CCDD asked the project to conduct a project evaluation, including structured interviews with school pilot site coordinators. This Research Brief describes the findings of those interviews, as well as the steps that the project is taking to ensure other schools have the tools they need to avail themselves of these practices.

Method

We obtained University Institutional Review Board Approval to conduct structured interviews with site coordinators from our 12 2016-2017 school year project pilot schools. Of the 12 pilot schools, 8 chose to be interviewed (one school had two respondents; n=9). Interviews were conducted by two project staff members (2nd and 3rd authors), with staff not interviewing pilot site leaders on their own caseloads. All interviews were conducted by phone and then transcribed verbatim.

The interviews were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The two interviewers first read and became familiar with interview content. Both staff then independently coded one interview. Coding was subsequently compared and discussed, and broad themes were identified. Where individual coding differed, discussion generally resulted in agreement.

Themes were discussed and refined based on initial coding, with some new codes being revealed. Each staff then independently coded the remaining interviews. Coding was once again compared and agreement reached.

Results

Nine school staff, across 8 pilot sites, were interviewed about their experiences and insights in implementing Peer Support Arrangements and/or Peer Networks in their schools. These staff were primarily special education teachers, although we did interview two school psychologists and a guidance counselor. We discuss the overall results in terms of benefits perceived, challenges, and plans for continued implementation.

Benefits

School staff cited positive outcomes from the project that fit roughly into three categories: social outcomes, academic outcomes, and school climate changes. The majority of respondents cited positive benefits for students with and without disabilities, including more interaction, activities done together such as school dances, and friendships that have developed. As one respondent noted: "Friendships have been the main goal, and the greatest accomplishment". In general, more benefits were identified for students with disabilities, including communication improvements, improved self-esteem, and more initiation of social contacts.

For one school, peer networks were reported to ease the transition between middle and high school for a group of freshman who had been in peer networks together since sixth grade. The students advocated for each other, easing transition, as well as advocating to continue their networks in high school. Students reported that "their transition went so smoothly, and it was because they had their peers there with them. They were able to generalize that to other people that they were just getting to know."

Social benefits were also cited for students without disabilities, including increased advocacy, enjoyment of network activities, and peers without disabilities who had previously been "on the margins" being able to contribute. Some teachers purposely chose peers who may have struggled academically: "For kids who maybe are not, you know, the stellar academic students or that type of thing - that they have something they can really contribute to in our school environment."

Academic outcomes were also seen more strongly in students with disabilities, including learning grade-level content, progress in IEP goals, and "positive academic progression," partly due to the simple fact of inclusion in general education classroom. One respondent noted that students with moderate to severe disabilities "are learning the same content that their peers are learning. We've seen grades go up. We are seeing academic progress in IEP goals for MSD students (students with moderate and severe disabilities), just a lot of positive academic progression." Other comments centered on more acceptance by general education teachers, and greater participation in general education core content classes (as opposed to just electives) for focus students.

Respondents noted that students with disabilities had higher levels of engagement in the general education classroom when paired with non-disabled students. Respondents reported an increase in interactions, more communication with adults and peers, more excitement about academics, more effort, a greater willingness to be part of a group, and a greater likelihood of speaking up. As one respondent noted for at least some of the focus students with disabilities:

...we've seen where they are more willing to be part of a group, to work together on a project, say in science, a poster they all have to work on together, we've seen them more involved in that. We've seen at times - some of them are still kind of shy - even volunteering to answer a question, or ask a question.

However, several teachers also cited academic benefits for students without disabilities who participated in peer support arrangements, primarily because in order to help their peers, they may have learned the material better themselves: "I picked a couple of students (without disabilities) I thought may have been struggling a little bit, and it helped them because they knew they needed to help teach the material."

Respondents also noted that providing peer support can provide motivation for potential career choices. At least two students planned to major in Special Education in college as a result of their experiences with peer networks and peer support arrangements in their school.

Respondents also felt that school culture had improved as a result of implementing these interventions. One teacher noted "it's changed the mindset of how some of our administrators and teachers view our students with disabilities, as well as

some of our students; it's shifted their mindset in a more positive frame." One respondent noted, "School culture has changed because my students, the students with MSD, are being seen more, so general education peers are more willing to include them. This has trickled into parents and staff. Everyone is being more inclusive, which is huge."

Challenges

By far, the majority of challenges cited by respondents had to do with time and scheduling, particularly as related to peer networks. Finding the best time to hold networks was a struggle if students didn't have a common schedule. For this reason, many schools had opted to hold networks during lunch. However, depending on school schedules, even lunch could present time constraints. Often schools had three or more different lunch periods, or staggered lunch start times. One site coordinator stated, "their schedules don't always match up, so you might have 10 minutes on one end, or 10 minutes on the other that they're missing class."

One pilot site was on a trimester system, with students' schedules changing three times per year. This presented a particular problem with peer support arrangements, since there wasn't continuity of peers and classes throughout the year. The site coordinator noted, "We tried it, but it was really tough. We had trimesters, and at three points in the year, we had to find all new peers and I don't know the gen ed. peers." In general, schools perceived more of a time issue in holding network meetings rather than peer support arrangements. This can primarily be attributed to the format of peer networks vs. peer support arrangements, because peer support arrangements occurred within the time limits of class schedules and peer networks occurred outside of class time.

Beyond the time involved in actual implementation of these strategies, respondents cited the time it took to pre-plan, meet with team members, and initially set up the interventions as challenges. As one respondent noted, "Getting started requires a lot of initial planning, but once you get those routines in place, you really do start to see lots of changes."

Two staff also noted that picking appropriate peers can be a challenge. Understanding the philosophy behind the interventions can be difficult for some students, especially for younger students. Peers may not be comfortable in their roles or consistent in attendance. Finally, initial project "buy-in" from administrators, teachers and students was also cited as a challenge, although it was noted that once a program was successfully implemented, positive attitudes emerged.

Finally, facilitating friendships that extended beyond the school day was identified as a challenge. Enabling peers to connect in newly formed relationships outside the school setting, or even in extracurricular activities at the school, could be a significant challenge if transportation was not available.
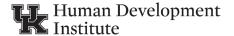
Continued Involvement

Respondents said that for the most part they were able to balance responsibilities of sustaining peer networks and peer support arrangements with their other teaching or school responsibilities. Predictably, if they had other adult support to facilitate network meetings and/or peer support arrangements, they felt more able to balance their responsibilities. Respondents noted that the balance got easier over time, but initial project implementation was more difficult to manage. One respondent noted that at certain times of year (e.g., state testing), she had to step back because of other job responsibilities. One respondent felt that the project actually made her a better teacher because the practices should be ingrained in everything teachers do, and "I really don't feel like it is taking away from teaching whatsoever."

Respondents all reported that they planned to continue peer networks and peer support arrangements in the coming school year. Several talked about planning peer networks for new students in the upcoming year, in addition to maintaining existing networks. For example, one respondent noted: "I'm actually getting three new students. One of my goals is for each of them to have their own network. My goal is to get facilitators set up this summer." Several respondents spoke about wanting to increase their focus on peer support arrangements, such as identifying classes students can take, getting to know general education teachers better, and providing more initial supervision for peer support in general education classrooms.

Conclusion

While all of our respondents perceived benefits for both students with and without disabilities through their schools' implementation of peer networks and peer support arrangements, and each of them planned to continue to implement these practices, expanding the use of peer networks and peer support arrangements in schools throughout Kentucky will require a very focused and thoughtful approach. This is especially the case as the project nears the end of its anticipated funding in June 2018. The project has taken the following steps to ensure continued adoption of these evidenced-based practices in schools throughout the state, so that the positive impacts noted by the school site coordinators interviewed in this Research Brief will continue:

1. Development of the project website (www.kypeersupport. org), including videos illustrating peer networks and peer supports in KY schools, and dissemination through the Kentucky Department of Education of these resources to all KY schools.

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2. Creation of a higher education module for teachers in training. We are making this module available to all KY colleges and universities offering teacher training programs in moderate and severe disabilities (MSD). We have also worked with the KY Personnel Development Grant (SPDG) to ensure participating universities who are preparing future teachers have access to the higher education module.

3. Development of training resources for KY's Regional Education Cooperative low incidence consultants, including all of the project's regional and district-level PowerPoint training packages, planning forms, and supplemental resources.

4. Development of Autism Cadre modules on peer supports and peer networks through the work of our Project Consultant, Dr. Erik Carter of Vanderbilt University. These modules are designed for current teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and include specific examples/applications of peer support arrangements and peer networks for students with ASD and the evidence base for these interventions for students with ASD. The modules include both online and face-to-face delivery mechanisms (peer support arrangements ASD module: https://youtu.be/DG00rLEniPg; peer networks ASD module: https://youtu.be/vE425tsmyeI)

5. Ongoing work with KY legislators and educational policy makers to ensure that the development of peer support arrangements and peer networks are promoted to KY schools as evidenced-based practices that benefit all students. As this Research Brief goes to press, the project staff are currently slated to present their work to the Kentucky General Assembly Joint Legislative Educational Subcommittee in December 2017.

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