

Peer Support Arrangements as an Evidence-Based Practice

Peer support arrangements offer an evidence-based alternative to an exclusive reliance on paraprofessional support in inclusive classrooms. Peer support models involve teaching one or more peers without disabilities in the same general education class to provide targeted academic, social, and behavioral supports to their classmate with severe disabilities (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, 2009). After participating in an initial orientation, students work together throughout the semester while accessing needed support and facilitation from the paraprofessional. As these students gain experience and increased confidence, the paraprofessional looks for opportunities to fade direct support and shift to a broader role within the classroom. Although primarily advocated as a new role for paraprofessionals, other school staff (e.g., special educators, general educators, related services providers) can also serve as facilitators of peer support arrangements.

What might the impact of these support models be on participating students and staff? For students with severe disabilities, research suggests peer support arrangements may be associated with increases in social interactions, communication skills, access to support, academic engagement, and friendships (see Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010). Research suggests peers without disabilities may benefit academically from their involvement, develop new perspectives on disability and inclusion, and gain valued relationships (Copeland et al., 2004; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). For educators, this intervention is considered feasible to implement within everyday middle and high school classrooms (Carter & Pesko, 2008). Last, paraprofessionals report they appreciate having more explicit guidance on their roles within inclusive classrooms and interacting with a broader range of students (Carter, Moss, Hoffman, Chung, & Sisco, 2011).

Implementing Peer Support Arrangements in Inclusive Classrooms

Peer support arrangements represent one of many approaches to delivering peer-mediated interventions in inclusive schools. Although they should be adapted to meet the needs of specific students in particular classrooms, peer support arrangements typically involve the following steps: (a) preparing and planning for peer supports, (b) recruiting peers, (c) orienting students to their roles, (d) supporting students as they work together, (e) reflecting on the impact, and (f) extending interactions beyond the classroom.

Preparing and Planning for Peer Supports

Before launching a new peer support arrangement, it is important for the facilitator to develop a strong plan that addresses (a) how students will work with and support one another during various class activities, and (b) how the social and learning needs of the focal student (i.e., student with severe disabilities) will be met. A strong peer support plan should be individualized, consider the strengths and needs of the focal student, and align well with the particular classroom context. We recommend general and special educators reflect together on the following questions:

- What are the standards informing curricula, instruction, and assessment in this class?
- What expectations does the general education teacher hold for all students in this class?

- What individualized education program goals will the student work on in this class?
- Which supports will the student need to progress on these standards, expectations, and goals?
- Who will provide each of these supports?

Although several planning tools can be drawn upon to support inclusion (e.g., Cushing, Clark, Carter, & Kennedy, 2005; Jorgensen, McSheehan, & Sonnenmeier, 2010), it is especially helpful to clearly delineate the roles of peers and paraprofessionals in providing support and to detail what participation will look like for the student with severe disabilities (see Figure 7.1). This involves having the planning team reflect on typical activities and routines within the class, determining how the student with severe disabilities will participate in each, and deciding on the types of support he or she will need. For example, the team might consider whether the student could participate independently, with assistive technology or adaptive equipment, or with occasional or ongoing support from peers or adults. The team might then generate a peer support plan outlining how peers and adults will be involved in providing some or all of the needed supports. For example, during lab experiments in a biology class, the student would listen to teacher directions, help gather materials for the experiment, and work with peers to carry out the experiment. Peers would share their materials with the student, offer opportunities for the student to make choices about and provide input into the experiment, converse about the assignment, and encourage the student to use his or her communication device. The paraprofessional would facilitate social interactions, provide positive feedback to students, and offer suggestions for how the peers might work together. All of these ideas would be recorded on a planning sheet that is referenced when initially training and subsequently supporting students (see Figure 7.1).

Recruiting Peers

Among the most important steps when establishing peer support arrangements is to identify interested peers who will be effective in these roles. The classroom teacher, special educator, and/or paraprofessional should work collaboratively to consider which students might be most appropriate to invite. Although research has not yet addressed the most important qualifications for serving as a peer support, some characteristics are worth considering. Although teams may be inclined to focus only on high-achieving students, peers who are themselves struggling academically often make excellent peer supports and may even benefit academically from their involvement (Cushing & Kennedy, 1997). Based on our own work with schools, we recommend identifying students who have consistent attendance, demonstrate willingness to help other students, model positive behaviors, have good interpersonal skills, and seem eager to learn new skills. In addition, consider involving students who either have an existing relationship with or have demonstrated some interest in getting to know the student with a disability.

Multiple avenues exist for picking specific students. When students with severe disabilities are able to communicate their preferences, facilitators should ask students who they enjoy talking with, who they would like to get to know, and/or who they already consider to be a friend. The classroom teacher will likely have insight into which peers already get along well with the student or would benefit personally from assuming this role within the classroom. Last, observing in the classroom can provide helpful information about which peers work well together in groups or

already interact with the student. Although finding interested peers is usually not difficult, it is important to remember that the choice of peers is likely to impact whether friendships ultimately develop and extend beyond the classroom.

Figure 7.1
Example Peer Support Plan

Class:	U.S. History	Student:	Devin
Teacher:	Ms. DeStazio	Peers:	Stephan and Mason

Typical activities and routines	Expectations for all students	Needed adaptations and supports	Roles of peers in providing support
Whole-class instruction.	When Ms. DeStazio lectures, students should listen, take notes, and respond to questions; students should contribute at least once in all group discussions.	Devin needs guided notes on which he records key words.	Devin will check his notes against those of his peers and ask questions as needed.
Small-group instruction.	Students read historical vignettes and prepare group responses based on available information; students also work in groups to prepare for occasional debates on historical topics.	When working in groups, Devin benefits from occasional redirection and extra assistance with using the technology to access information.	Peers prompt Devin to share his ideas or answer a question using his communication device; they also help him research relevant information on the Internet.
Independent work.	Students complete reflection questions and short readings to prepare for discussions and exams.	Devin needs readings copied to his tablet to use his document reader.	After finishing their work, peers will discuss selected reflection questions and record Devin's responses.
Homework and assignments.	Students complete daily assigned readings and weekly vocabulary tests.	Devin completes abbreviated quizzes with multiple choice responses; some readings are substituted.	Peers help Devin review content in advance of his quiz and talk through incorrect answers.
Needed materials.	Reading packet, textbook, notebook.	All readings are available electronically.	Peers help Devin access readings on his tablet.
Other expectations.	All students should be respectful, work well with others, and keep a detailed planner.	Devin uses a planner application on his tablet instead of a physical planner.	Peers help Devin program his assignments into his planner and make introductions to classmates.

After potential peers have been identified, the facilitator and/or classroom teacher can individually approach students before or after class to invite their involvement. In some cases, broad invitations can be extended to anyone in the class who might be interested. In either case, the facilitator should emphasize the general goal of the peer support arrangement (e.g., to help the student with a disability participate more fully in the class), describe what is involved in providing this support (e.g., sitting next to the student, helping the student participate in various class activities, talking with one another during appropriate times).

Orienting Students to Their Roles

Orientation meetings are designed to provide students with the initial information and connections they need to get started within a peer support arrangement. These meetings can be held in a quiet place at lunch, before or after school, in a study hall, or during class (when appropriate), and meetings typically take less than one hour. The adult facilitator describes why peer support strategies benefit students and are a desirable alternative to relying entirely on adult support. The facilitator then shares background information about the focal student, including his or her strengths, interests, behavior, and typical interaction style. Next, the facilitator highlights the primary goals of the peer support arrangement for the focal student (e.g., to promote interactions with peers, to teach communication skills, to increase involvement in class activities). The facilitator emphasizes the importance of peers using respectful language and respecting one another's privacy. For example, it is perfectly acceptable to share information about the student's strengths or interests in a social situation, but it is not okay to discuss a student's challenging behaviors with others. In addition, the facilitator shares general expectations related to their involvement (e.g., sitting next to the student, assisting during particular class activities, making introductions to other classmates, encouraging communication device use) along with specific strategies drawn directly from the peer support plan. Last, the facilitator emphasizes that peers will have ongoing support and can ask for additional assistance anytime they need it. The students then share any questions they have about their involvement. An outline of potential orientation meeting topics is displayed in Table 7.1 (Carter et al., 2009; Carter et al., 2011).