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Using a peer buddy system to increase interaction between students with special needs and their peers

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**USING A PEER BUDDY SYSTEM TO INCREASE INTERACTION BETWEEN
STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND THEIR PEERS**

by

Kristi Foster

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Abstract

Kristi Foster

**USING A PEER BUDDY SYSTEM TO INCREASE INTERACTION BETWEEN
STUDENTS WITH SPECIAL NEEDS AND THEIR PEERS**

S. Jay Kuder

Master of Arts in Learning Disabilities

Students with disabilities in a self-contained elementary classroom were given peer mentors to encourage and motivate them to become more active socially. The peers modeled appropriate behavior and social skills during special area classes. The four students who volunteered to act as mentors met with the special education teacher and discussed the plan of action. As a result of the intervention, the students with disabilities approached their typical peers more frequently. The students with disabilities grew in many ways socially, emotionally and cognitively. The mentors gained knowledge of the peer mentor system as well as knowledge of students with disabilities. The results showed that students with disabilities could increase their interaction with typical peers as a result of participating in a peer buddy program.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Students placed in a self-contained special education class have a tendency to stay together when playing, working and otherwise socializing. Even when opportunities arise for the students to sit or work with students in a general classroom they typically will not participate in activities with the general education students. When these students are out of school and members of adult society they will have to socialize appropriately with all types of people, including new people, not only the ones with whom they are familiar.

Social skills are essential life skills and are a necessity both in and out of school. It is of paramount importance for all students to develop appropriate interpersonal skills that can be used when interacting with children and adults alike. When these students reach adulthood and obtain jobs and careers, they will in a sense become part of a team, a social group working in collaboration towards a common goal. Communication and social interaction within these groups will be an integral part of their daily work experience and will be critical to stability or advancement in their careers. Without proper social skills it will be difficult for the students to become part of or contribute to the team regardless of how good their ideas or critical thinking skills.

With many students in a self-contained special education class, it is necessary to use models or examples as learning tools. As with any other skill, social skills must also be learned. Without the presence of a proper model, in this case the interaction of socially

adept students, it is extremely difficult for these students to learn the intricacies of social interaction.

By having limited interaction with the general education students, it is difficult for special education students to integrate socially with the general education students.

Because of this limited exposure special education students can easily be intimidated by the prospect of approaching general education students. To increase the likelihood of inclusion between the two groups the use of a peer “buddy system” could be highly beneficial in dispersing the tension associated with breaking into a new social group. By introducing students one by one to another, one from special education and one from general education, there is a higher likelihood of forming a bond between students. With a peer buddy along to introduce the new member to the group the anxiety levels of the special education student could be greatly decreased, and by using the peer buddy as a model for interaction within the group, it would increase the likelihood of acceptance of the new member by the group. Once accepted the new member could continue to observe and participate as he or she becomes comfortable with the group, and the group becomes comfortable with him or her.

Given the importance of social skills development for students with language learning disabilities, this study will examine the effectiveness of a peer buddy intervention to increase social interaction between students from a self-contained classroom and students from a general education classroom. It is hypothesized that having a buddy during special related classes will increase socialization with students with disabilities. Three students will be participating in a “lunch bunch” crew where social skills will be modeled and practiced during the lunch period. These three students

will be with three other students from a general education fifth grade classroom. The six students will be instructed by the elementary school guidance counselor. The appropriate social skills will be modeled and students will then be expected to use these skills in their encore classes (i.e. art, music, library and Spanish). It is anticipated that the students will also gain confidence and see how students from a general education population talk to one another. It is hypothesized that these students will use the modeled strategies and begin to mingle with other students from the fifth grade general education classroom in special area (encore) classes. Further, it is believed that students will gain confidence and begin to mature in the area of social skills.

Students within a self-contained classroom are students who have an IEP or Individualized Education Plan. These students may have a learning disability and have been found to need a smaller class size as well as more individualized attention to succeed in their education. The students in the general education classes (the majority without an IEP) know that these students are “different” for a variety of ways. By creating more opportunities for socialization and a set model there will be clear expectations for the students from a self-contained classroom. Students from the general fifth grade classroom will also share their experiences with these students and get a chance to “shine.” The students will take on a teacher type position and these students will be the real leaders.

There is a range of possible negative outcomes as a result of this program. If the students from the self-contained setting are inappropriate and fail or refuse to take part in the modeled behavior or structure shown in “lunch bunch” then problems could occur. If the fifth grader feels that their peer buddy is not working hard at trying to socialize with

other students he/she may become frustrated and give up. The student may also feel that he/she can not help these students become more apart of the general education population within special area classes. If these situations are to arise, the students could be removed from the program and replaced, or the program could be cancelled and there would really be no harm to any of the students involved. However the largest risk in the program is the potential for bullying. With three special education students being introduced to a group of general education students, there is a degree of risk that they could become the targets of jokes and bullying within the group. Even with proper supervision and teacher involvement, for the program to be effective it requires that the students at one point or another be left on their own to keep the interactions natural or “real”, to get the best results from the program.

The potential positive impact that this system could have on students from both classes make it a valid investment. The first and foremost is the seamless integration of the special education students, resulting in them learning by example of their general education peers. Secondly by placing the role of mentor on general education students whom may otherwise not have the opportunities within their group to be leaders, the program could instill a sense of confidence in them by placing them in a leadership role. The three selected students from the general education class may also have a greater influence on their general education peers and increase socialization with everyone as a whole group rather than smaller “cliques.” These six students stand in position to make a substantial change to the social dynamic of their entire grade, that could hopefully trickle down to lower grades, and carry on to the higher grades. If both groups, special education and general education, become comfortable with one another and begin

interacting in a completely natural sense, they could greatly narrow the line that seems to have been drawn between the special and general classes.

There are many other ways to increase socialization with students with disabilities, however using a peer buddy system the students with disabilities should gain peer acceptance. The students from the general education class should gain empathy, tolerance and a sense of responsible leadership. This would create a stronger community of learners and human beings throughout the school.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Social Skills and Learning Disabilities

What are social skills? “Social skills are defined as the set of competencies necessary for students to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with their peers, teachers, family, and other community members” (Walker, Colvin, and Ramsey, 1995). “Social skills are those communication, problem-solving, decision making, self-management, and peer relations abilities that allow one to initiate and maintain positive social relationships with others” (LD online). Social skills are interactions between people which may be verbal and nonverbal. The definition of learning disabilities does not include social skills within its definition; therefore it is not mandatory for the classroom teacher to instruct in this area. Students with learning disabilities have difficulty interpreting facial expressions as well as body language. Therefore, students struggle with understanding what is being said and in what context or setting. They may even become frustrated and “lash out” or something worse (Morris, 2002).

Students with learning disabilities have tendencies to struggle with their interpersonal skills compared to children of similar ages without learning disabilities. Some students with learning disabilities struggle socially; therefore they have difficulties with developing relationships and holding onto friendships because of their unseen or unlearned communication skills. Students are not trained on social skills by parents or teachers and are expected to have these skills once they enter school. Once they enter school they are supposed to know the appropriate manners and strategies to use in their classrooms. However, if a student misbehaves then they may fall under one category or

lacking in different social skills and therefore the classroom management piece is lost by the teacher. This student will then be seen by the students as “inappropriate” (Bryan, 2005). Students who are learning disabled are also more likely to continue on the path of social rejection because of their lack of communication skills even if they switch classes or schools and get a “new start.”

Why is there such a focus on social skills in students with learning disabilities? Research indicates that children who struggle with developing appropriate social skills will also struggle with “horizontal” relationships, meaning relationships between themselves and partners of equal status or peers and can experience serious difficulty in communicating and relating to others (Hartop, 1989; Shaffer, 1996). They experience problems with initiating, developing and maintaining relationships, resulting in being ignored or rejected and finally in isolation (Frostad & Pijil, 2007). By being at a social disadvantage so early in life, it is possible for students to be forever labeled as socially inept, resulting in rejection or complete ignorance by others later in life. This rejection is the catalyst for feelings of total isolation. What is worse than the feelings of isolation is the actual isolation that occurs. This isolation can hinder access to social and thereby education experiences both in school and out of it, producing effect detrimental to ones self confidence and image (Asher & Cole, 1990). It is also seen that students with learning disabilities are less well-liked due to a lack of social confidence and unknown social skills to begin conversations with more popular or well-liked students. They avoid the pro-social behavior and tend to converse with students similar to their academic and social abilities (Moisan, 1998).

Frostad and Pijl (2007), conducted a study in Norway, where the educational system is strictly inclusive and students with disabilities are not labeled. The study group was comprised of 989 students in fourth and seventh grades. The focus of the study was to evaluate social skills in cooperation and empathy. The gaps in social skills between students with learning disabilities and those without were not substantial among the fourth grade subjects. The staff was aware of which students were disabled, however the students were included among the larger group. However, Frostad and Pijl found that the seventh grade students showed a much larger “gap” in areas of cooperation and empathy, which leads to a lower rate of peer acceptance and decreased numbers of friendships and perhaps increased feelings of isolation. It was found that the students with disabilities had more difficulties in the areas of socialization seen through little peer acceptance, very few friendships and little group participation. The students with disabilities with the most trouble were students with autism, behavior problems and those with severe cognitive impairments. It was also found that 20% to 25% of the students with disabilities were rejected by their peers compared to a rejection rate of 8% for non-disabled students. It is clear through this study that students with disabilities are at risk for social skills deficits and that social skills should be developed throughout the students’ with disabilities school career.

Interventions for social skills

There are many different interventions used to incorporate students with disabilities and to assist them acquire social skills. Some interventions are video modeling, modeling, peer mentors and social skills training or therapy. Training should take place at an early age and continue through a student’s educational career. Some

other strategies include positive reinforcement within a classroom with clear expectations for all students. Teachers can also provide encouragement and social skills through “read aloud” time during the school day and make connections using characters from these texts (Morris, 2002). Students will begin to improve their social skills and in time be able to initiate conversations, greet others, and conduct their behavior properly in any type of environment they may arrive.

Students who succeed in learning the appropriate social skills are more likely to be incorporated into peer social groups during his or her school years (Strain, 2003). On the other hand if the social skills are not appropriate and learned accordingly then students will be socially rejected and could feel a sense of isolation in their home and school community. These children should be trained throughout their school careers; because it has been shown short training programs are not sufficient (Pffner and McBurnett, 1997). Pffner and McBurnett (1997) explain that “long-term effects are disappointing” in regards to short term training programs due to the fact that the skills are used less often or not at all as time passes. Social skills, much like academic skills, need to be reviewed and repeated frequently so regression is not seen.

La Greca and Mesibov, 1981 performed a study in which they conducted a summer program at a learning development center that specializes in educating children with learning disabilities. The study group consisted of four boys ranging in ages from twelve to sixteen years old, which had been referred by the centers teachers as well as the schools program director. These students had been selected on the basis of “inappropriate social behavior, limited contact with peers and poor social interaction skills.” During the six week program, the students were trained in two broad aspects of

social interaction, “communication-conversation skills” and “taking the initiative in social situations.”

Two instructors, one male and one female, conducted the weekly classes. The focus of each week’s class was reviewed at the beginning of the next class before proceeding to the next step in social interaction. The classes focused on “Greeting,” “Joining,” and conversation skills respectively. The classes progressed each week with micro reviews at weeks three and five, and with a macro review encompassing the entire process on the sixth and final week.

As a “final exam” the students took part in two videotaped role play exercises. The tapes were then reviewed in random order and assessed by graduate students studying clinical psychology. The first role-play scenario was speaking to a new student in school. The four males were tasked with speaking to a female student for at least two minutes. The conversations were assessed through topics, discussions about each topic, number of questions asked and follow-up comments made. In the second role-play, which also lasted two minutes, the four males were required to join a conversation with two students who were already involved in a conversation prior to them approaching. The four males were graded on a scale of one to nine on whether or not they greeted the two girls by their names, if they joined in the conversation and made comments pertaining to the particular conversation and how long did they spend talking to the girls. Following the two video-taped role-plays the students completed a self-evaluation form rating themselves and their interactions with their peers.

After the six week program, La Greca and Mesibov concluded that the students with learning disabilities did, in fact, increase their social skills. The students were able to

initiate, join with their peers and enhanced conversations with their peers by making conversation pertinent to the situation and even posing open-ended questions. The four male students were more likely to initiate conversations, ask questions and interact as a whole with their peers as a result of the program. The authors concluded that the students with disabilities made consistent gains. The students became strong in “greeting” and “approaching” others, and were competent in asking open ended questions. Overall the students did improve their social skills; however more work could be accomplished in a longer time period.

Students with disabilities tend to “stay together.” This has been called “homophily,” which means that students prefer to be with students of similar age, gender and cognitive ability (Magee, 1995). Like all students; children tend to be attracted to others with the same interest in sports, theatre, nature, etc. Students with disabilities obtain a comfort level with their peers, once they step outside of these boundaries they may get rejected or feel threatened by the other students from the general education population (Magee, 1995).

Another intervention used to increase social skills among students with and without disabilities is using the inclusion model as well as whole group training sessions. Terpstra and Tamura, 2007 stated that when typical peers are placed with students with disabilities the students had more opportunities to see the appropriate behavior and good models throughout the day. In inclusive classrooms, students will learn from their peers, however many students may require more extensive training regarding specific social skills. Even general education students will benefit from these trainings, particularly in gaining empathy and tolerance for others. If these strategies are not presented then they

are less likely to mingle and interact with the other children (Terpstra & Tamura, 2007). Early childhood programs should begin training students in different social skill areas of development to increase students with disabilities likelihood of initiating play and feeling accepted by his or her peers. Different trainings may include sensitivity training, social strategies, socio-dramatic skill training, and class wide social skill training. According to Hauser-Cram (1993), students who spend more time with general education students spend more time socializing with them; however it does not mean that all students will bond with the general education students. The interventions and strategies must be properly presented and opportunities for interactions through playing games or other non-school activities must be provided.

A strategy that Mary Magee used was cooperative learning in promoting social interactions between peers. Mary Magee (1995) developed a social skills training approach where students learn through cooperative learning. “Cooperative learning is the instructional linking of small groups of three or more students working together to maximize their individual learning as well as learning of others” (Magee, 1995). Cooperative learning can be used to increase interactions between children of all different cognitive abilities; cooperative learning increases the chances for students with disabilities to socialize with their peers. Magee (1995) suggests that everyone benefits from cooperative learning as long as expectations are clearly set. Students should be assigned a goal for the end product, each student will be assigned a role for the group so equality is evident and a reflection or assessment at the conclusion of the activity will allow for further opportunities of student associations. In summary, students will be included more often than not if all students accept one another within their classroom

community. The peers will have a greater opportunity for success and are less likely to create negative actions and/or behaviors (Mary Magee Quinn, 1995). Cooperative learning allows students to form friendships with his or her peers which in turn allows for community growth within the classroom. Students who do not feel involved in their classroom, may develop unwanted behaviors and as a result become disruptive in the classroom. This misbehavior in class have been shown to lead to potentially disruptive behaviors later in their school careers and lives, which may include substance abuse, truancy and delinquency after joining peer groups which are inappropriate (Walker, Shin, O'Neill, & Ramsey, 1987). Studies have shown that there is a correlation between social skills issues at a young age and anti-social behavior in adulthood. Disruptive behavior is a symptom of a child not having the proper tools or skills in order to participate; as a result of their lack of skills combined with a desperate desire for attention, the student will act out disruptively and at times violently. This desperate need for attention makes the children susceptible to criminal or gang related behavior. Statistics of increasing violence over the years are a clear indicator that children need to learn sufficient social skills and strategies as well as self control (Elksnin 1998).

One method for enhancing social skills Magee mentions is “cognitive-behavioral interpersonal problem-solving” (Magee 1995). This approach begins with teaching students positive social skills and changing their thinking through activities such as: role playing, feedback, social and token reinforcement. There were 64 studies completed on the cognitive-behavioral therapy, in 1991 Durlak found that the cognitive levels of the students are the most important factors for determining how well the intervention works. After studies were done, it was seen that students improved their prosocial behavior even

after a year. The parents, teacher and student all contributed to the assessment done afterward.

Social skills can be taught in either individual or whole-class meetings. The individual meetings are difficult due to student compliance and also the student is removed from their typical setting and therefore will not be able to see their peers model the appropriate behaviors. On the other hand, the teacher can focus solely on the individual's needs and struggles. The whole-class setting is helpful because students are not singled out or "pulled out" individually from their peers and therefore everyone can practice the skills taught (Magee, 1995).

What skills should be taught in the social skill training? One must identify the need and then the skills to be taught. Next, decide on the skill, discuss it with the students' involved, present instances where the student may try the skills being taught. The instructor will model the skills, students will practice the skills and then appropriate skills will be discussed. Students will also need to learn problem-solving skills, where they can learn how to resolve the problem or issue at hand (Elksnin, 1998).

Students with disabilities tend to decrease their social skills when moving into middle and high school levels due to their academic, functional and social skills. This is due to the fact those students are leveled and will be with their similarly cognitively developing students. Therefore they have little time spent with students of a variety of academic levels. If students were better socially prepared prior to leaving elementary school they would have more opportunities to make positive strides in the areas of relationship development and socialization while in the older grades (Carter & Hughes 2005).

Peer Buddies

Another approach to improving the social skills of students with learning disabilities is a “peer buddy” system. The “peer buddy” system is organized using general education students who “model” appropriate behavior and social skills as well as encourage the students with learning disabilities to get more involved in class discussions. The mentors will motivate their peers to naturally initiate conversations in various environments.

Haring and Breen in (1992) studied the use of a peer buddy system that used students from the general education class who worked with students with moderate and severe learning disabilities. The training group was established with the goal of increasing social skills through different supports including self-management, a communication book to keep track of interactions made as well as peer training. This social skill training program included meetings with adults and assignments with general education peers. During these meetings students would practice their social interaction with peers and weekly log was kept to record data. Once the training program was fully under way the social interactions also increased through observation of peer interactions, changing of behavior and different interventions were assigned to different students. It was observed that the students in the secondary level did increase their socialization with the general education population once the interventions were established (Haring and Breen cited in Carter & Hughes, 2005). Although, students who participated in this study did not continue with their advancements following the study, students in the general education class did increase their positive reinforcement with students with disabilities and were able to help them with appropriate instructions during their “special area”

classes (i.e. physical education) (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Carter and Hughes also speak about how the setting of the interaction may have an effect on the socializing, however some areas are more conducive to social skill interactions such as hallways, cafeterias and special education classrooms. This may have been why students were seen increasing interactions during the non-core or academic classes more so than in their core classes.

When children enter school with little background knowledge of the essential social skills or of the intricacies of peer relationships, they struggle in this area in the classroom, if skills are not developed. This can lead to disruptive attention-seeking behaviors within the classroom and a negative reputation will cause a lowered sense of self confidence or self-awareness. A classroom community is seen in many ways through appropriate peer relationship skills. These disruptive students are at times looked at as if they are “bad” because of their unwanted behaviors and are then isolated from the group. Teachers and parents may also play a part in this because they will instruct their children to steer clear of or avoid the student that is being inappropriate. The teachers may even be guilty of this because they do not want a “good” student to fall in line with the disruptive students as they fear their behavior is potentially “contagious”. Perhaps the educators are being narrow-minded in these actions. If the parents or teachers were to instruct the students, as a group, to attempt to include the troubled child, they could curve their behavior and reform the student through inclusion. By using a “group approach” when dealing with the disruptive child, the “good” children are also far less likely to be “sucked in” to the disruptive behavior. When students feel like outsiders because they are labeled as disruptive or “bad” they will begin to develop a negative self image that is

tightly connected to school, classmates and teachers and they will begin to dread attending classes (Magee, 1995).

An exemplary example of peer buddies was established in West Pittston, Pennsylvania at Montgomery Avenue Elementary School. In this particular district, students are included in classes if it is felt necessary and appropriate for the student. The district established a program called GATEWAYS (Gaining Access to an Education with All Youth and Students), which was set up to help districts in Pennsylvania to provide a strong education for students with disabilities. Gateways program includes a team approach including the special education teacher, music teacher, speech and language therapist, guidance counselor, parent of student, and principal of the school (Camoni & McGeehan, 1997).

The general education students would be the peer buddies to help with the adjustment of the students into an inclusion setting. These students would be the “models” and demonstrate the appropriate behavior for the students with disabilities. Students are sent home with letters to their parents if they would like to volunteer for this program. The team would meet to discuss the student’s IEP (Individualized Education Plan) and goals for each student who is involved in the program (Camoni & McGeehan, 1997).

The general education students met three to five times to be trained by the life skills teacher. The buddies were introduced to their students through a discussion of characteristics and what each student needed. The students were taught to gesture to the student with learning disabilities when he or she spoke out of place, they restated directions, and took away distracting objects around them all during their time they were

included within the class. Some students in the training even suggested wonderful ideas to help the other students, which also worked well (Camoni & McGeehan, 1997).

The benefits of the peer buddy system were an increase in social skills of the students with disabilities and a decrease in unwanted disruptive behaviors. Students were also able to transition better when necessary. Benefits of this program were even seen in students from the general education classroom. These students were seen to help more at home, were more patient with family members and children. Some of the students who were the peer buddies even asked the student they were helping to their birthday party and friendships were established. The team was impressed at how well this worked for all the students involved, but it was important that everyone be on the same page throughout the process (Camoni & McGeehan, 1997).

One success story was a young boy named Gary who was functioning at a five-year old level of development; however he was nine years old. He would constantly speak out of turn and announce answers. Since he participated in the peer buddies program he has been able to pay attention, follow directions and was even asked to take part in a musical held at the school. It seems as though this program has created many opportunities for all students involved (Camoni & McGeehan, 1997).

All in all, students need to have social peer relationships at an early age to allow for more appropriate times during their school years. The more opportunities teachers and parents provide for students to socialize in different settings the higher the student's self-esteem will climb. If students are not taught social appropriateness at home, then teachers must take it upon themselves to include these skills in their everyday teaching through different options in the curriculum. Social education is more effective and far

less intrusive if it is seen within the school's regular curriculum rather than a separate set of lessons. The correlation between social skills at an early age and in adulthood is significant and when programs are developed at early intervention or preschool settings students will have a broader catalog of social resources from which to draw their actions.

Chapter 3

Method

Two male students and one female student in a self-contained learning language disabilities fifth grade classroom in southern New Jersey were subjects of this study. The three students are all Caucasian and age 11. Two of the three students are classified as multiply disabled and the third student is classified as communication impaired. Student number one, a male student, is classified as pervasive developmental disorder (PDD), and he seeks attention in negative ways by acting inappropriately through whining, calling out, and oppositional behaviors. Student number two, also a male, student is very social however seeks adult interaction more so rather than his peers his own age. Student two will interrupt two or adults mid conversation and attempt to join in their conversation uninvited. The third student, a female, who is classified as multiply disabled also struggles to find age appropriate peer friendships. She is very inappropriate with her actions and as a result has been put on a behavior plan to increase her on task and decrease distractibility tendencies as well as staying focused on the activity presented.

The children in this study tend to gravitate toward their peers within the self-contained special education class because they feel most comfortable with students on their same level. The general education students also believe, since they are in this particular class, that they “different” or “weird” and do not approach them. This experiment will allow the students to become more socially confident and socially appropriate when in their special area classes along with general education students. The students who volunteered to help will be guided by the special education teacher to incorporate appropriate strategies and techniques to apply when integrated in different classes.

These three students seem to have the most difficult time when it comes to encore classes (i.e. art, music, etc.) and talking with their same aged peers. After spending many months with these three students they appeared to be the children who need the most training as far as social skills. They are currently in a “lunch bunch” group with other students struggling to socialize with their peers lead by the guidance counselor. These students would benefit from any interaction with their typical peers. Their peers are their models and therefore allow them to interact appropriately see how to socialize in a more social appropriate way.

Throughout this task the three students, peer buddies (models), guidance counselor’s knowledge and commitment will be used. Students were surveyed from one general education class, because the three students within this study attend encore classes with this particular class. The students who volunteered gave a lunch-meaning they had lunch with me and we discussed some of the goals of this project and any questions or concerns they had before starting. Due to scheduling conflicts with our school guidance councilor there was not enough time for the students to receive lunch training with the guidance counselor, however in the future I would include this training. The students were asked to engage students from the self-contained class during the encore classes and approach them in conversation or discussion when feasible. The students did at times include them at the table where they were working during library class and asked them to partner up with them during gym class. Other interactions included discussion during art related projects, music small group song practice and simple light conversation when there was free time for all students in the class.

The volunteers were able to switch days in which they engaged these students; one student would choose one encore class in which to focus on working with the special education, student based on a rotating schedule by day. This allowed for a precise schedule and a more organized idea of who would try to persuade the students and model for them appropriateness while also giving the general education students a “day off”. There were four general education students who volunteered during this study, therefore one student would have “off” each day during their encore periods. However, at times the student that was not involved that particular day decided to approach the students and still practiced modeling for them during the encore classes.

Chapter 4

Results of Study

Prior to beginning the intervention of the peer buddy system, a baseline was done of how often students from the self-contained class approached students in the general education class. The figure below (4.1) displays each of the students or subjects and how many times they approached a student in the general education class after three days of observation. Student #2 did not interact with the general education students during encore classes; however student #1 and student #3 both interacted between 0 and 2 times during these three days prior to the intervention beginning.

Figure 4.1

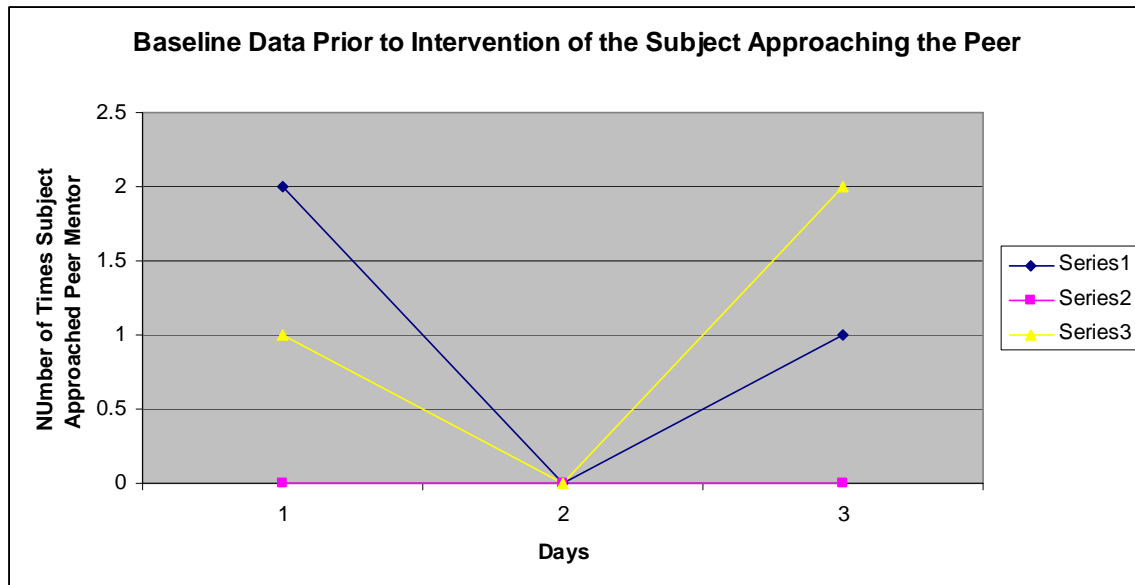
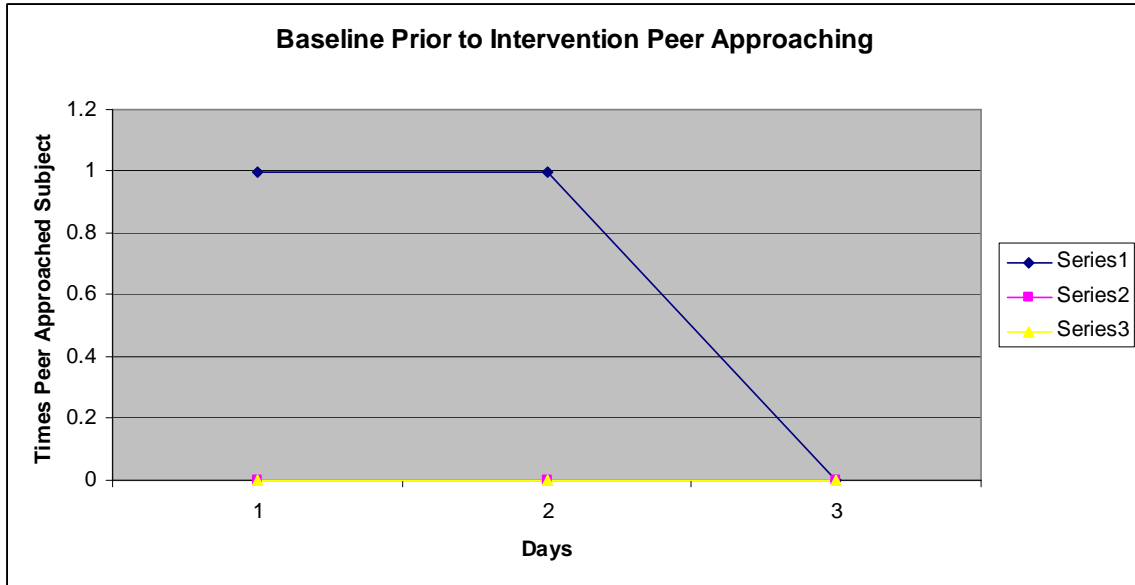


Figure 4.2 displays the number of times the peer mentors from the general education class interacted with the students (subjects) in the self-contained class. The students did approach students in the self-contained class prior to the intervention being placed. However, student #1 (blue) did not receive a response the one time they approached and the other two interactions did receive positive responses. Student #3

(yellow) approached his peers three times and two of the three times he received positive responses.

Figure 4.2



The peers did not approach the subjects prior to the intervention with the exception of student #1. At these times, the students requested that she stop talking or she was acting inappropriately at that particular time.

Figure 4.3

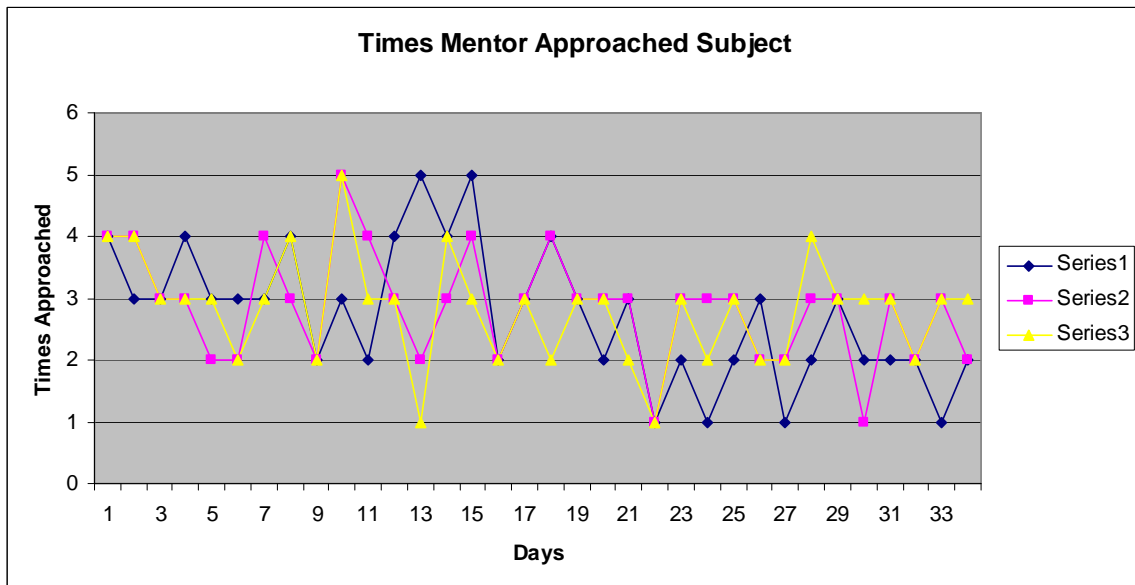


Figure 4.3 displays the number of times the mentor approached the subjects after 34 days of the intervention. After completing the study to results show that the mentor began approaching the peer around 2-4 times per encore class. The mentor for student #1 had a more difficult time approaching the student because she had more trouble accepting help from a peer compared to the other two students. Student #2 and #3 both were approached by their mentors daily between 2-4 times a day in the earlier part of the study and less by the end of the study allowing the peer to grow and initiate conversations rather than their general education peer.

Figure 4.4

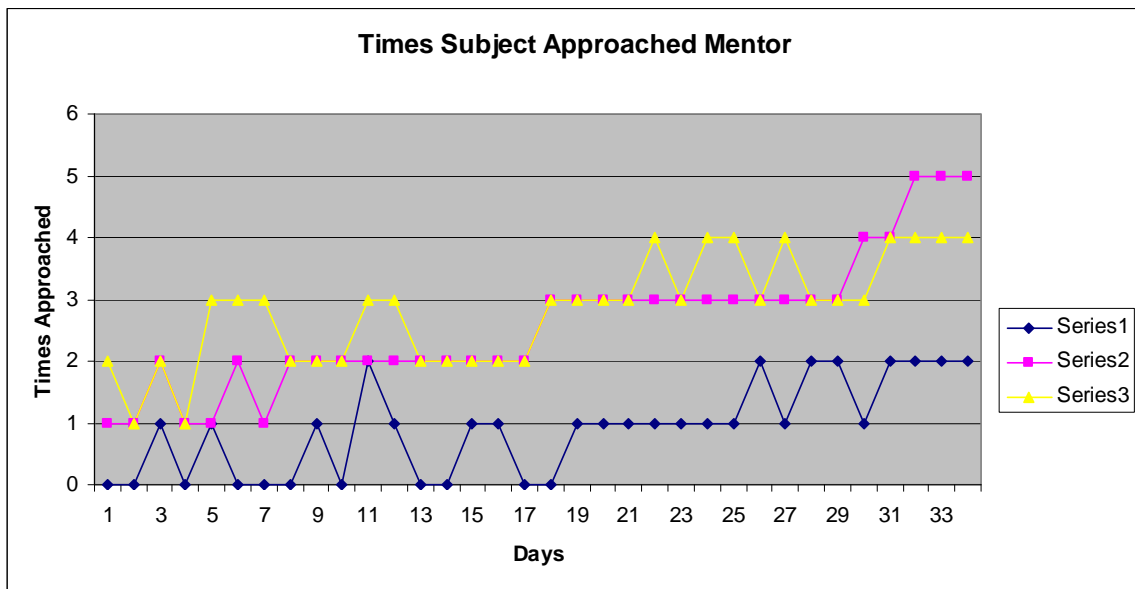


Figure 4.4 displays the number of times the subject approached the mentor during the 34 days of the intervention. All three students with learning disabilities began approaching their peer mentor after several days of the mentor working with them. It is clear that student #1 approached her mentor less than the other two students; however she

steadily continued to initiate conversation with her mentor in the last four encore classes included in the study.

Figure 4.5 represents the negative responses seen during encore classes between the students with learning disabilities and their mentor. The negative interactions were common during the first ten days of the study; however student #2 and #3 both decreased their negative responses after day 6. On the other hand student #1 did respond negatively when she felt she was able to complete the task assigned independently. Although, student #1 did continue to respond negatively many days into the study, she finally began responding appropriately around day 27, where there were not any negative responses given to her mentor.

Figure 4.5

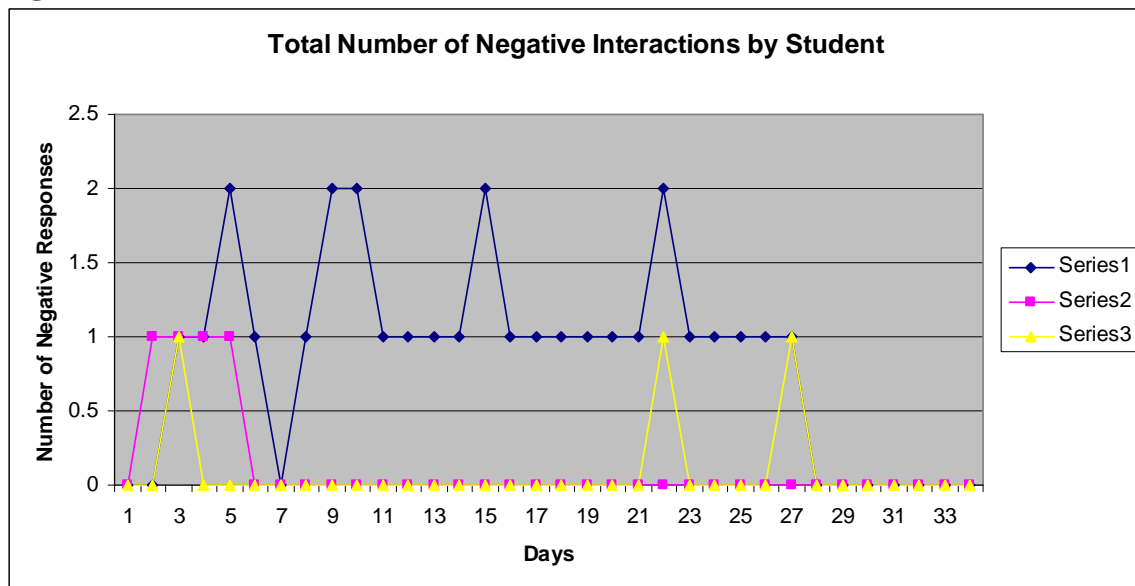
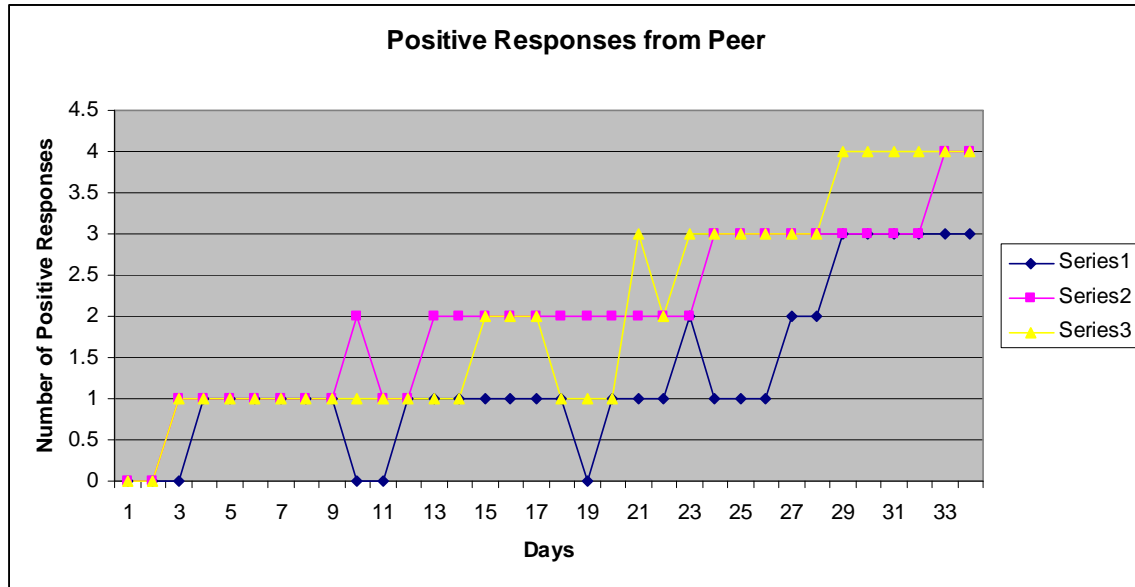


Figure 4.6



In Figure 4.6 the line graph displays the number of positive responses from their peers. All three students showed growth in the area of positive responses toward their mentor by the end of the study. It is clear that the student was hesitant at first, but once the student realized that their mentor truly wanted to help them, they felt more comfortable.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

Will using a peer buddy system allow for an increase in interaction between special education students and their peers? After reviewing the results, all three students showed tremendous improvements in their social skills as well as their behavior. The students began improvements after one week of the mentors being involved. Prior to the peer mentors, students would only socialize with the general education peers when necessary or if there was a problem. The students with disabilities only approached their mentors once or twice in the early stages of the experiment, however once they reached day 18, students spoke with their mentor at least three times daily during encore classes. Student #3 showed the most improvement for negative responses between them and their mentors. All students increased their positive interactions between them and their peer mentors since the start of the intervention. They avoided contact with the general education students, this study/experiment allowed for an increase in socialization between these students.

Students who participated in this peer buddy system were eager as well as very enthusiastic in taking part in something that would help others at their own school. The students with learning disabilities were at times more hesitant to receive extra help, when they may not have thought they needed it. However by the conclusion of the two months, students were more tolerant of the students with disabilities and others. The peer buddy system allowed the typical students to gain a better understanding of the language learning disabilities students and learn about themselves at the same time. Students could relate when they discussed favorite television shows or singer/songwriters they enjoyed

listening to in their free time. It allowed students to see that although they are in a self-contained class they still are fifth graders who enjoy doing similar activities as themselves. They even formed somewhat of a bond, which has been unseen between these students in the past.

After completing this study of incorporating peer models/mentors into encore area classes, where students took on the responsibility of encouraging their peers to work on their social appropriateness and set an example. The observation was conducted for about two months continued to show progress. The three students who participated in the study all have shown growth in the area of socialization, maturity and appropriateness. It is clear that overall the students have grown and even the mentors are more empathetic and understanding towards the students from the language learning disabilities class. They are no longer looking at the students from the self-contained class as “different.” They are more willing to include and discuss their ideas with these students. The students in the fifth grade have enjoyed participating in this study and hopefully this will lead to more opportunities in the future for more social groups/ mentors of this kind. By these fifth graders participating, it has allowed other students in the other general education fifth grade classes to also socialize with these students. Although, this study has proven helpful to all students who participated, one student did not have a strong increase in social appropriateness. She has a more difficult personality and struggles when others are helping her, she will need to continue with different social skills groups/ meetings, to allow her to become more comfortable with this task.

Previous research has not generally examined the effects of utilizing peer mentors around age 11. There is little research seen at the elementary school, with the exception

of social skills groups inside and outside of classrooms. Many of the programs where peers were used are seen in the middle/high school levels. For example, Haring and Breen (1992) asked both elementary and secondary aged students to participate in a peer mentor group, students were trained by adults and it was concluded that students increased their social interactions with their peers. Although, students did increase socialization, the improvements in socialization, did not continue, after the study was completed. However, the peers were able to continue to develop and initiate conversations with the students with disabilities. However, it was more evident in more social areas of the school day, such as in the hallway or at lunch time, where students are more independent.

This study generally ran very smoothly, but several difficulties arose. For example, the “lunch bunch” group could not be comprised of students with and without social skill difficulties. The leaders of the social skills group (from the district), approached the guidance counselor about how the students without disabilities should not be in the group. The idea for “lunch bunch” is for the students with disabilities to improve their skills. The guidance counselor presents information to these students, such as one strategy where they use “I statements” to describe when they are feeling upset or angry. Therefore, training with the guidance counselor was limited. Also since the study also began in February, many of students had already set friendships and ideas or preconceptions of students in the self-contained class from previous years. If this program is continued next year, then starting in October or November would be a more ideal situation for both students and teachers who are involved. Another problem, arose when one student whom this study would have tremendously benefited was moved to a

private school setting due to more serious emotional disabilities. She would have gained a sense of understanding and a great feeling of self-confidence if she was part of this mentor program.

In the future, incorporating more time with the guidance counselor and a more entire school sense of what this program allows would increase the awareness and the likeliness of less socialization issues or dilemmas in the later elementary grades. There are two younger self-contained learning language disability classes where the students feel the same way, and struggle with gaining strong friendships outside of this classroom.

The goal for the future would be that the program be school-wide and not limited to students in the self-contained classes, because they are already looked at as “different” and other students within the building are struggling with the same issues. There would be no reason why this study or program would not work for all students in grades two and up. Prior to second grade, students are not quite aware of their power among their peers.

Students were successful in achieving the goal set forth for them. It is hoped that they will continue to develop in the area of socialization and anticipated that more groups will be able to share in the success. Students with disabilities learn from their peer models/mentors and enjoyed the extra time spent with them. Students who volunteered from the general education class were extremely helpful, and continue to show good character in the way they treat their peers.

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