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Reflections from the Peer Mentor Experience:
Evidence for Social and Moral Growth

Cynthia May and Lauren Pittard
College of Charleston

Author Contact:

Cynthia May, PhD

Department of Psychology

College of Charleston

Charleston, SC 29424

Email: mayc@cofc.edu

Phone: 843 953 6735

Abstract

Opportunities for postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have proliferated in recent years, and many colleges and universities that offer such opportunities utilize a peer mentor system to support students with ID. Peer mentorship can be both challenging and rewarding. The present study examined the premise that the challenges associated with peer mentorship facilitate social growth for peer mentors. Participants in this study included two groups: (1) college students without disabilities who served as peer mentors for college students with ID and (2) college students without disabilities who were not peer mentors. All participants completed the Stress Related Growth Scale (Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996), which includes measures of personal development, social maturity, and moral growth. Results indicated that peer mentors reported significantly greater gains in moral growth and social maturity than non-mentors. Thus, peer mentor systems utilized by many colleges and universities to support students with ID may offer college students an important opportunity for social growth.

Reflections from the Peer Mentor Experience

Postsecondary education (PSE) has been an increasing goal for individuals with intellectual disabilities (ID) and their families in recent years (e.g., Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006), and institutions across the country have responded by offering new opportunities for students with ID to attain PSE (Hart & Grigal, 2008). The benefits of these PSE options for students with ID are already emerging (e.g., Migliore, Butterworth, & Hart, 2009), and a related question concerns the impact of these programs on campus communities. As recently as a decade ago, individuals with ID were virtually absent across nearly all institutions of higher education, especially as participating members of the learning community. As students with ID enroll in regular college classes, move into residential university housing, join campus clubs, and are employed in campus venues, it will be important to assess the influence of these changes on all members of postsecondary institutions, including students, faculty, and staff.

There is good evidence to suggest that the outcomes for colleges that include students with ID will be very positive. Related research in a variety of domains shows the favorable outcomes related to the inclusion of individuals with ID in everyday settings. For example, a large body of literature indicates that inclusion of students with ID in regular educational settings, recreational activities, athletic teams, and employment settings reduces negative bias about disability, and serves to eradicate antiquated and erroneous stereotypes as well as reduce discriminatory behaviors among peers without disabilities (e.g., Carter, Hughes, Copeland, & Breen, 2001; Findler & Vardi, 2009; Floyd, Purcell, Richardson & Kupersmidt, 2009; Hardman & Clark, 2006; Hughes et al., 2002; Krajewski & Flaherty, 2000; Novak, Feyes, & Christensen, 2011; Slininger, Sherrill, & Janowski, 2000; Siperstein, Glick, & Parker, 2009). Across other

studies, there is evidence that inclusive experiences can debunk myths and stereotypes (Bedini, 2000; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & Wilhite, 2000), and foster friendships and social interactions (e.g., Bedini, 1993; Edwards & Smith, 1989; Kalyvas & Reid, 2003).

In addition, there is evidence that both parents and siblings benefit when the family includes a child with ID (e.g., Dykens, 2005; Findler & Vardi, 2009; Hastings & Taunt, 2002; Hastings, Beck, & Hill, 2005; Stoneman, 2001; Taunt & Hastings, 2002). For example, parents of children with disabilities have expressed the positive impact of the child on the family, including a changed perspective on life, increased sensitivity, and improved family dynamics (e.g., Knox, Parnenter, Atkinson, & Yazbeck, 2000). Furthermore, adolescents who had a sibling with ID demonstrated social growth and cognitive resources that were not typically shown by others their age, took on more responsibility, developed significant relationships, were more sensitive to others, and reported getting the most out of their lives and experiences (Findler & Vardi, 2009). There is even preliminary evidence demonstrating the positive impact that inclusive interactions have on college students, as 80% of college students who participated in Best Buddies, a national program that fosters inclusive, reciprocal friendships, developed a more positive attitude about people with ID and a better understanding of the challenges they face (Hardman & Clark, 2006).

The extant data thus suggest that the inclusion of students with ID in postsecondary opportunities may have a number of favorable outcomes, including a positive shift in attitudes about disability, improved social interactions, and even enhanced personal and social growth, especially for individuals who interact closely with students with ID. The present study was aimed at exploring this possibility, and in particular we sought to assess personal, social, and

moral growth for college students who served as peer mentors for students with ID enrolled in an inclusive college program.

Peer mentorship can be challenging and, at times, even stressful for all involved. With respect to mentors, for example, even when they receive training prior to their experience, mentors may encounter novel or unexpected challenges during their mentoring relationship, and may need to address those challenges without immediate support or guidance. It is difficult to anticipate every hurdle that mentors and mentees may face as their relationship develops, and thus it is impossible to provide preemptive guidance for all situations. Even with guidance, mentors and mentees may struggle with issues like communication, boundaries, and schedules. Furthermore, both mentors and mentees may find the relationship less than optimal simply because of differences in personalities and/or interests, and may struggle in knowing how to express that dissatisfaction or request a different pairing. Thus, navigating the mentor-mentee relationship carries with it the challenges inherent in any social relationship and these challenges may be coupled with some anxiety if mentors have little prior experience with individuals with disabilities. Research indicates that experiences that challenge individuals and require innovative, adaptive responses can lead to positive personal growth (e.g., Dykens, 2006; Janoff-Bulman, 1992; Schaefer & Moos, 1992; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995). We hypothesized that the challenges and stresses associated with peer mentorship would lead to positive outcomes in terms of social and moral development for mentors.

Participants in this study included a group of college students without disabilities who served as peer mentors for students with ID enrolled in a PSE program, as well as a control group of college students who were not peer mentors and had no regular interaction with students with ID. All participants were asked to reflect on a stressful event that occurred in the

last year, with the peer mentors reflecting specifically on social or academic experiences associated with mentoring, and the control group reflecting on social or academic stressors related to their everyday college life. Participants completed the Stress Related Growth Scale (SRGS; Park, Cohen, & Murch, 1996) to indicate the ways in which the stressful events affected them personally, socially, and morally. To preview the findings, peer mentors reported significantly more social and moral growth as a result of their mentoring experiences than other college students reported as a result of typical college stressors.

Method

Participants

Participants included 121 students from the College of Charleston. Twenty-seven of the participants (Mentor Group) served as peer mentors for students with intellectual disabilities that were enrolled in the REACH Program at the College of Charleston. Ninety-four of the participants did not serve as peer mentors (Control Group), and reported that they had no regular interaction with people with ID.

Those in the Mentor Group provided social, academic, and independent living support for students with ID, and met with their mentee at least four hours each week for a full semester or more. Mentors served in a variety of roles, including tutors, social buddies, housemates, or resident assistants. Some mentors (e.g., academic tutors) received course credit, some (e.g., resident assistants) received a monetary stipend, and some (e.g., housemates, social buddies) were volunteers.

Participants were recruited through e-mail and online recruiting mechanisms, and were asked to complete an online survey. Participation was voluntary and anonymous; participants received \$10 compensation for their time.

Materials and Procedure

The Stress Related Growth Scale (SRGS; Park et al., 1996) was used to assess the students' perceptions of outcomes of stressful events. The scaled asked participants first to reflect on a stressful event that occurred within the last year. We modified the instructions so that participants in the Mentor Group were directed to "recall an event from the last year related to your REACH mentor experience that you consider to be stressful. The event may be social (e.g., interactions with your mentee) or academic (e.g., supporting your mentee with a course assignment) in nature." Those in the Control Group were directed to "recall an event from the last year related to your college experience that you consider to be stressful. The event may be social (e.g., interactions with roommates or friends) or academic (e.g., completing a course assignment) in nature."

Participants then read 50 statements designed to assess outcomes of the stressful event. For each of the 50 statements, participants rated the degree to which they agreed with each statement on a 3-point scale, from 1 (not at all) to 3 (very much). Some of the statements measured personal growth (e.g., I learned to be a more confident person), some measured social maturity (e.g., I learned to respect others' feelings), and some measured moral or spiritual growth (e.g., I changed my life goals for the better). The SRGS has been shown to have good internal reliability, and scores on the SRGS are reliably related to positive changes in positive affect, optimism, and coping strategies (Park et al., 1996).

All participants completed the Stress Related Growth Scale (Park et al., 1996) using an online platform (SurveyMonkey). Participants were allowed to complete the survey at any computer with internet access, and responses were collected from each sample population for a

two week period. All responses were anonymous and confidential. Upon completing the survey, participants were debriefed and received compensation for their participation.

Results

Mean Total scores for the SRGS, as well as the scores for each of the three subscales are displayed for each group in Table 1. A series of one-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) assessed group differences in Total SRGS, personal development, social maturity, and moral/spiritual growth. Results indicated that, relative to the Control group, participants in the Mentor Group had reliably higher scores for Total SRGS, $F(1, 119) = 4.9, p = .03, \eta^2 = .04$, social growth, $F(1, 119) = 7.8, p < .01, \eta^2 = .06$, and spiritual growth, $F(1, 119) = 6.8, p < .01, \eta^2 = .05$. Although the difference in scores for personal growth was in the right direction (means of 72.9 and 70.2 for mentor versus control groups, respectively), this difference was not reliable, $F(1, 119) = 1.4, p = .24$.

Discussion

The present study investigated the hypothesis that inclusion of students with ID in postsecondary opportunities would be associated with favorable outcomes for campus communities, in particular with positive social growth for peer mentors who supported students with ID. Participants in this study included students without disabilities who were either active peer mentors for students with ID or who had no regular contact with students with ID. All participants completed the SRGS (Park et al, 1996), which required them to reflect on a stressful experience and the impact the experience had on their lives. Peer mentors reflected on an experience related to mentoring, while non-mentors reflected on an experience from everyday college life. Peer mentors showed significantly greater gains in social and moral growth on the

SRGS than non-mentors, and their total SRGS scores were higher than non-mentors. Scores did not differ significantly on the personal growth subscale.

The present data are consistent with other studies in showing that peer relationships between students with and without disabilities can lead to significant positive outcomes for students without disabilities (e.g., Bedini, 2000; Carter et al., 2009; Floyd et al., 2009; Hughes et al., 2002; Krajewski & Flaherty, 2000; Novak et al., 2011; Slininger et al., 2000; Siperstein, Glick, & Parker, 2009). The findings also extend research showing that the challenges associated with supporting individuals with ID can lead to social and moral growth (Findler and Vardi, 2009). Peer mentors in our study reported that their experiences led to a greater understanding of how to help others, a strong sense of community, and an ability to appreciate the strengths of others. They also reported that their experiences led to an increase in their own faith and a desire to have an impact on the world.

The present findings are preliminary, however, and are not without limitations. The data here were based on self-report measures, and it may be useful for future research to extend these findings with additional measures of social growth and development. In addition, our two samples reflected on different stressful events before making their ratings: The mentors reflected on a stressful situation related to peer mentoring, while the control sample reflected on a stressful personal event. Differences in the responses to these events may have stemmed in part from the differences in the events themselves. Finally, the samples we used were self-selecting, that is, participants were not assigned randomly to groups but instead peer mentors chose to engage with students with ID. Thus, differences in the samples may have contributed to their responses to stressful situations. It is possible that students who choose to be peer mentors for individuals with disabilities are also those with greater adaptive and social skills, and they may also have

greater moral development. These potential differences across samples could have contributed to the differences in the way our groups responded to a stressful event. Future researchers may want to compare reflections on the peer mentor experience with reflections on every day college experiences within a sample of peer mentors.

These limitations notwithstanding, the present findings offer some suggestions for emerging postsecondary programs designed to serve students with ID. Post-secondary programs are of increasing interest to students with intellectual disabilities and their families (e.g., Getzel & Wehman, 2005; Grigal & Neubert, 2004; Hart, Grigal, Sax, Martinez, & Will, 2006). While the number of postsecondary programs around the country is increasing, there is great variability in the nature of those programs and the ways in which they support students with intellectual disabilities (e.g., Hart, Mele-McCarthy, Pasternack, Zimbrich, & Parker, 2004; Hart et al., 2006; Neubert & Moon, 2006; Stodden & Whelley, 2004). Some programs offer fairly segregated models, others mixed or hybrid models, and others offer more inclusive or individualized models (e.g., Hart et al., 2006). Little is known about the outcomes of these different types programs for youth with and without disabilities, and more precisely what kind of impact a peer mentor system has for those who participate. Our the data suggest that when postsecondary programs utilize peer mentor systems to provide support for students with ID, they may not only facilitate success for students with ID, but they may also offer critical opportunities for social growth and development for the students who serve as peer mentors.

Positive outcomes of this sort may prove instrumental not only in recruiting peer mentors for existing peer mentor programs, but also in securing resources for initiating a new peer mentor program or expanding an existing program. If replicated and extended, the present data may lay the foundation for peer mentoring programs for students with intellectual disabilities to be

considered an integral part of the learning experience for aspiring educators, entrepreneurs, medical professionals, and community leaders. A critical next step will be to examine the kinds of training and experiences that are essential to positive mentoring outcomes for all individuals. Understanding these outcomes will prove critical for refining and sustaining these peer mentor systems in the long term.

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Table 1. Mean Total SRGS and Subscale Scores (with standard deviations in parentheses) forMentor and Control Groups

Group	Personal Development	Social Maturity	Moral/Spiritual Growth	Total SRGS
Mentor (N=27)	72.9 (10.3)	41.7 (5.2)	9.0 (2.5)	123.6 (15.1)
Control (N=94)	70.2 (10.6)	37.8 (6.7)	7.5 (2.7)	115.5 (17.2)
