Welcome to this Exceptional Children podcast. I'm Lorraine Sobson, Publications Manager for the Council for Exceptional Children. Today I'm speaking with Erik Carter, a professor in the Department of Special Education at Vanderbilt University. Erik and his colleagues recently published a research article in Exceptional Children entitled, "Randomized Evaluation of Peer Support Arrangements to Support the Inclusion of High School Students With Severe Disability." Welcome, Erik! Thank you for joining me today.

Thank you, Lorraine. It's good to be with you.

The article we're going to discuss today is actually part of a multi-year study, about various aspects of peer supports and the effective inclusion of students with disabilities in the secondary setting. For this part of the study, what were the research questions you set up to answer and why are they important to the field?

The heart of our study was really to understand the effectiveness and the acceptability of peer-support arrangements for supporting students with severe disabilities in general education classrooms at the high school level. We were particularly interested in whether that approach was more advantageous than the prevailing ways that we support students in these classrooms, which in many ways, is through the one-to-one, individually assigned paraprofessional.

I think—like lots of people all around the country—we're really interested in how we help students with severe disabilities, those students with intellectual disabilities or autism or other multiple disabilities, who are eligible for their state's alternate assessment, but how do we support those students access the rich learning and social opportunities that exist really all throughout their school and, particularly, in classrooms in their school?

One of the ways that increasingly schools have been supporting students to access those inclusive settings has been through assigning a special education paraprofessional to those students. In fact, if you walk into most schools, you're [more] likely to run into a paraprofessional than a certified special education teacher. While there are some advantages to having special education paraprofessionals provide some of the support students need in these classrooms, we're really concerned about the over-reliance on paraprofessionals and concerned that, sometimes, the very supports that they provide may inadvertently hinder the social and learning outcomes of students in those classrooms.

What were the outcomes that you were hoping to measure for the students with disabilities with this intervention?
Erik: We're really interested in helping students access all of the social and academic learning opportunities that exist in a classroom. Those are challenging constructs to measure. We have an array of measures that we focused on. Some focused on the social aspects of participation in a general education classroom, so that might include the interaction students have with their peers—not only about their work, but also the social-related interactions they have about other aspects of their lives before or after instruction begins.

We were also interested in whether students would increase their initiations to their classmates as well as their responses to the initiations of those classmates. We wanted to see whether students interacted more not only with the students that they were paired to work with, but also with other classmates. Are they having greater contact with other students in those classrooms?

The social part of inclusion is really important, but so is the learning part. We also wanted to look at the impact of peer supports on academic engagement. Are students participating more fully in the learning opportunities that exist in that class? Whether it's large group lecture, small group lab work, individual seat work, or the range of things that take place in a classroom. We're also interested though—in addition to whether students are more engaged—are they actually making progress on their individualized IEP goals? Are they making more progress on their social-related goals as well as their learning goals in that classroom?

We hope, though, through those interactions and that engagement and that participation in the classroom, that some of those interactions they have might turn into more lasting relationships or even friendships. We captured the extent to which the students that they were working with in class led to interactions outside of the classroom and ultimately friendships. In the midst of all of that, we also wanted to know how peers who were involved in these interventions were impacted by the opportunities they had to learn alongside and get to know their classmates with significant disabilities.

Lorraine: Before we get to the results, let's talk a little bit about how the intervention was actually organized. What kind of support did the peer partners provide the students with disabilities?

Erik: This was a very individualized intervention so the common component across all of the students was that they were paired with one or more of their classmates, who didn’t have significant disabilities, to work together on a range of things that took place in the classroom. That’s the common component across all the students, but, of course, every class looks a little bit different and the needs of students with severe disabilities are very heterogeneous. The ways peers provide support to their classmate is based on an individualized support plan that's crafted by the paraprofessional and gen ed teacher and special educational teachers.
Some of the supports peers provide might be around promoting communication goals and fostering social connections. That might include encouraging their classmate’s use of their communication device or AAC system or initiating conversations or responding to their classmates’ communication attempts. Or, maybe, modeling appropriate social skills or encouraging their classmate to share an idea or contribute to ongoing class instruction.

Likewise, peers provide support related to learning and class participation. That might include working together on a collaborative project, maybe offering feedback to their classmate on their work, sharing class materials, highlighting an important concept, or just assisting with some aspect of a lab activity or other group project. There’s a common set of academic and social supports that peers might learn to provide, but those are matched to what the student with disabilities really needs to be actively part of learning in that particular classroom.

Lorraine: How did you select the peers who are going to provide the support and how did you train them? How did that all come about?

Erik: The process for selecting peers is also fairly individualized. We rely heavily on the classroom teacher and the paraprofessionals to identify students that they think would benefit from having the opportunity to work alongside their classmate with significant disabilities. We want to make sure that we’re involving peers who are really interested in being part of it and want to get to know the student. We tend to look for students who would be a positive role model and would have consistent attendance so that they could provide support in a consistent way throughout the semester.

We also want to make sure that the input of the student with severe disabilities is part of that process. We ask for their input about who they might be interested in working with. Then, the general education teacher and the paraprofessionals approach those peers that they think would be a really good fit. We’re aiming typically for two to three peers to be a part of each peer support arrangement. We find that most students who are approached are really excited about that opportunity and most ultimately agree to be involved.

Not everyone will want to do this, but I think teachers are often surprised by just how many peers, given the right invitation, really do want to have an opportunity to get to know their classmates with significant disabilities. The process for training peers to serve in these roles is not usually as complicated as teachers might think. It typically takes place in about 40 to 60 minutes, maybe over a lunch period or two. The paraprofessional, special education teacher, and sometimes a general ed teacher might sit down with those peers and walk through just a series of things that might relate to the supports they provide to their classmate.

They might address the rationale for why they’re involving the peers in providing some of the supports the student might need. They give a little background about the student they’ll be supporting, some of their strengths and interests, the things they like to talk
about, the things they’re involved in at school and in the community. They talk generally about the kinds of goals the student has for the class.

We don’t provide confidential information about IEP goals but talk generally about goals like, “We really want the student to be more part of what happens in the class” or “to have more opportunities to interact with other classmates around shared learning opportunities.” We talk about some of the specific ways they can provide support in different types of class activities. What does it look like to support this particular student during a lecture? Or when you’re working in a small group? Or [when] you’re doing a lab activity? Or [when] you’re doing independent seat work and you’re really not supposed to be interacting? What does it look like at each of those time points? That comes off a written peer support plan that the team has crafted.

We also do talk about some of the issues about what supports to provide as a classmate but not to provide support like a mini-teacher or a tutor. We also address some of the supports that they shouldn’t be providing, things around hygiene and grooming and other sorts of things that are really more the responsibility, not of a peer, but of a teacher.

What’s interesting about that, is all of that can happen in about 40 to 60 minutes, because much of the training happens hands-on as students start to work together. While there’s an initial guidance peers receive before they’re paired up and the classroom’s rearranged for students to sit next to one another, the para then models how to interact with the student and provides that guidance hands-on, over the first couple of days that peers begin working together. Gradually, over time, that para fades back their support as the students become more comfortable and confident working with one another. There’s an initial training, but a lot of it happens in more of a modeling format as students begin working together.

Lorraine: You just mentioned talking to the peer supports about their role at different time points and in different settings. How did you measure interactions between the focus students and their peer supports? How did you standardize scoring across these content areas, locations, and the students with their range of needs and disabilities?

Erik: This is a particular challenge in doing this kind of research, because [the study included] essentially almost 100 students with severe disabilities. They’re in a wide range of classrooms, from academic classes to elective classrooms. They have a wide range of learning outcomes in those classes. The challenge is to identify measures that are going to work across all those settings and still help us capture consistent progress across each of these students.

In terms of doing that for our interaction outcomes, we opted to identify some direct measures of interactions that could be captured across these settings. We measured the interactions of students, whether they were social-related or task-related. We would make anecdotal notes of what students talked about. We focused on those two general categories because we wanted to both promote conversations about work but [also]
focus on relationship-building. We also wanted to see interactions that extended beyond their work at appropriate times in the class.

We also looked at students' initiations and responses and then had observer ratings of things like reciprocity and appropriateness of interactions and affect and response relevance. While appropriateness looks different from one class to the next, observers can take into account the context of that class when providing those kinds of ratings. What students are working on certainly varies widely from one class to the next, so we had a measure of academic engagement that resembled an on-task measure, but it was anchored to what the curriculum was that other students in the class were learning. We're interested not only whether a student's engaged, but are they engaged in work that aligns with what other students are doing and the curriculum for that particular class.

Now, every student has individualized IEP goals as well they're working on these in these classrooms, some social-related, some academic-related. There we had to turn to a process called "goal attainment scaling." Essentially, what that allowed us to do was to put social-related IEP goals and academic-related IEP goals on a common metric and then gauge progress on that particular metric over the course of the semester.

Did students make the expected level of progress after one semester of working with their peers in social and academic areas? Did they make slightly more progress than we would have anticipated or considerably more progress? Or, likewise, did they make less progress or considerably less progress than what we would have hoped for? That allows us to gauge whether students are making more or less progress on their social and academic goals [when compared to students] not receiving peer supports in their classroom.

Lorraine: Now we can talk about results! The big takeaway from this article is that the peer-support arrangements offered distinct advantages over what you've described as the prevailing approach of students with disabilities receiving this type of support from paraprofessionals. That was both socially and academically. At the same time, though, you're clear that peer supports are not a magic bullet. How should administrators and special educators interpret your findings?

Erik: Lorraine, we summarized the findings really well on almost every measure that we collected. We saw distinct advantages when students worked alongside their classmates without significant disabilities. Of course, under the supervision and modeling of paraprofessionals, but not exclusive working with those paraprofessionals. Measures of overall interactions increased, the number of peers students contacted increased, their academic engagement increased as they decreased their proximity to a paraprofessional and increased their proximity to peers. They made more progress on their social-related goals and were more involved in classroom activities.

Of course, along with all that, we also noticed that for many of these students, the interactions that they had with their peer supports ultimately turned into friendships
that lasted one semester and even two semesters later. Very promising outcomes. It leads us to think about some really clear implications for how we support students in these general education classrooms.

I think the first really important take-away is that we’re reminded that how we support students in inclusive classrooms matters just as much as where they spend their school day. Inclusion is not just a location. These students were all part of these general education classrooms who didn’t receive peer support arrangements, but when we thoughtfully designed an individualized support plan that involved peers, we were able to produce really, really substantial improvements in social and learning outcomes.

I think the take-away there is, let’s not just think about where students are enrolled, what classes they’re enrolled in, but what happens in those classrooms. Does that really lead to the kinds of outcomes that we hope for?

I think the second take-away is that we need to be really thoughtful about whether and how we use individualized adult supports in these general education classrooms. There’s a tendency in schools—whether it’s requested by general ed teachers or by parents or others—that when someone who has a significant disability is going to be part of a general education classroom, the inclination is to say, "Well, there really should be an extra adult in that classroom to provide direct support to the student." Oftentimes, the argument goes, if there is that extra support, the student would be more academically engaged or more connected to their classmates. But it turns out the opposite is true. Sometimes, the ways we support students inadvertently hinders the very outcomes we’re hoping for.

I hope these findings really will spur reflection on not only where students spend their day but how we’re supporting them to access social and learning opportunities in those settings. I think for schools, this really does require rethinking the roles of paraprofessionals in inclusive classrooms. It’s really going to require administrators and IEP teams to think about what really are proper roles for paraprofessionals and to what extent do we need to use them as more supplemental roles to the general education teacher and more facilitators of connection to the learning that’s coming from that general educational teacher.

We found, to a "T," the paraprofessionals were excited about these new roles but they needed some guidance on how to fulfill them. They needed some affirmation from their teams that it was okay to not always be right next to the student, for them to have a full participation in those general education classrooms. In fact, sometimes fading back their support led to the very outcomes that they were aiming for.

Lorraine: What you've just said reminds me that when we first started talking today, you referred to the “acceptability” of this kind of a study. Later, you also mentioned [that] the process is not as difficult as people might think. With many innovations in education, sometimes people are reluctant to implement something that seems a little outside-the-box. They also say, "We're already doing these interventions and these strategies." How
could you convince people that this peer support—with the supervision and facilitation of paraprofessionals and special educators—is realistic within today’s varied educational settings? What kinds of tips would you give schools who might be interested in giving this a go?

Erik: I think it’s been a long-standing concern within our field that not only are we recommending interventions that actually work, but those interventions have to be doable in everyday schools. An intervention that’s highly effective [but] that simply can’t be done with existing resources is really unlikely to be implemented. We spent a lot of time wanting to both understand how key stakeholders view these interventions and whether they considered them to be feasible and doable and a good fit within the classrooms in which they were working. We also wanted to make sure we tested the efficacy of the intervention under real-world conditions.

It really was the paraprofessionals and special educators and general ed teachers in this study who were the ones who were doing the recruitment and the training and the support and monitoring of peers and the students with disabilities who they were working with. In this study, it wasn’t researchers coming in and doing the intervention and finding good effects and then asking teachers to do this much like they did. This really was a case where we were coming alongside practitioners, equipping them to implement this intervention, and then looking at the impact when they carried it out under real-world conditions.

What we found as we watched this take place [was] not only were they able to do it with fidelity, but they were also able to implement it in ways that led to noticeable improvements in the learning and social connections of these students. We also spent time talking with and serving students with disabilities, their peers, the paraprofessionals, and the general education teachers about their experiences. We found large, strong support among all of those different stakeholders.

The students with disabilities really enjoyed working alongside their classmates. They ended up meeting more students than they otherwise would have. For the peers who got involved in this intervention, when we asked them about their experiences with this intervention, they talked about it as being one that was doable. They appreciated the guidance and support they got from the paraprofessionals, they enjoyed working with their classmates with significant disabilities, but they also learned some important things about themselves—and their perspectives on inclusion and diversity in their schools changed as a result of having those experiences.

Those two pieces, the buy-in of students with disabilities and their peers, are absolutely essential for this to work. We found that they were excited about this possibility. Many of them maintained those relationships one semester and two semesters later. We also talked, of course, with the paraprofessionals and the general ed teachers about their experiences and whether this worked well for the students.
As I mentioned earlier, the paraprofessionals, some of them were really excited about this at the outset, but some were a little bit nervous. They were nervous that if they faded back that direct support that they used to provide, that people might not think they were really doing their job. There needed to be some affirmation that their fading back that direct support was actually desirable and led to better outcomes. When that was communicated, they felt not only good about the roles that they were providing, but they actually enjoyed having the opportunity to meet other students and work with other students in that classroom and be a broader classroom base support role to the general education teacher.

For the general education teachers, they want to serve students with severe disabilities well, but don't always know how. Sometimes, they assume that because there's a paraprofessional, that that paraprofessional must know more about supporting students with severe disabilities than they do. We were really pleased that they saw this intervention as fitting within their classroom and being a good way to not only support the student with disabilities but also to do it in a way that didn't seem to have a negative impact on others in the class.

There seems to be strong support from the people who were part of implementing these interventions, but I think for schools that are concerned about time and cost, I think a couple of things really bode well with this intervention. The first, of course, is that it doesn't cost a thing. There's no curriculum to buy. There's no materials that have to be purchased. Essentially, schools are thinking differently about tapping into the natural supports that exist within a classroom rather than having to layer new supports or different supports into those classrooms.

Essentially, what you're doing is getting classmates to also be classmates to students with significant disabilities. The time required to train peers was pretty nominal, about 40 to 60 minutes. A lunch period or two. I think many of the teachers found that that was a reasonable amount of time to get these peers up and running. Then, the monitoring of the interventions happens within the ordinary course of the class period.

I think all of those really lean towards this being a doable intervention. The challenge, of course, is for schools to find the time to seek out and learn about these interventions, take them back to their teams and figure out a good starting point. What we typically recommend for schools is, just start with one student at a time. Find a student who's out in the general education classroom who has significant disabilities who'd benefit from this kind of support and work to set it up for them in that single class, to show that it can work, to get the buy-in of the general education teacher and the paraprofessional.

Then, as you've demonstrated that initial success, start to think about rolling this out to other class periods or to other students throughout the school. I think that incremental process of doing one student at a time and gradually scaling up is probably a more feasible approach than trying to do this with every student and every class period next semester.
Lorraine: That's a great summary of the approach and recommendations for how schools can implement it. I really enjoyed reading this article and thought it just ground-breaking and also very inspiring. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me in more detail about it today.

Erik: Thank you, Lorraine. I appreciated the invitation.

Lorraine: Erik's article, “Randomized Evaluation of Peer Support Arrangements to Support the Inclusion of High School Students With Severe Disabilities," is published in Volume 82 of Exceptional Children, a publication of the Council for Exceptional Children. To learn more about CEC, visit cec.sped.org.