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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A Study on Awareness of Young Peer Supporters in a Japanese Secondary School Through Thematic Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the nature of peer support activities in Japan through the experiences of young Japanese peer supporters in a secondary school. Participants, aged 13 to 14 years, were drawn from a secondary school in Osaka, Japan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, and data were analysed using thematic analysis, aiming to explore their lived experiences of being peer supporters. Four main themes emerged from the peer supporters' lived experiences; 1) Perceived generation gap, 2) Disconnection between training and practice, 3) Self-improvement, and 4) Cultural mismatch. These specific themes greatly assisted to explore the unrevealed children's views and some critical issues of peer support practices in Japan, and also confirmed the findings of quantitative studies (prior studies). In conclusion, some practical recommendations (e.g. "new classification for Japanese style peer support") for the peer support activities were suggested in terms of the findings.

Key-words: Peer support, counselling skills, social skills, thematic analysis, Japanese style peer support

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I. Introduction

Peer support, a relatively new concept in Japan, is an approach that builds on the helpfulness and altruism characteristic of friendship by extending it beyond friendship to the wider peer group. This often encourages children to offer other children strong emotional and behavioural support. In Japan, the peer support approaches were introduced to the school education in the 1990s when several children's issues had been exacerbated such as bullying, youth suicide, class disruption and school non-attendance. Peer support is very flexible in its use of activities and broadly relates to existing Japanese moral approaches and activities that encompass behavioural and emotional support. In a sense, peer support itself is the umbrella term, which allows its activities to suit various school needs, depending on the situations (James, 2014). This means that peer support programmes can be adopted to suit individual practices within schools that incorporate cultural and moral differences.

To a large extent, the willingness to develop peer support methods in Japan has arisen from a deepening concern about the increase in social and emotional difficulties currently experienced by Japanese children within the educational system (Nakano, 2004). Evidence suggests, that, bullying, school non-attendance, school violence, are related to insufficient interpersonal relationships among, which are caused by their poor ability to communicate with other children (Nakano & Sato, 2013; Edahiro et al., 2012; Igarashi, 2011; Makino, 2011, 2009; Miyahara & Koizumi, 2009; Katsuya & Kawamura, 2004; Iida, 2003; Emura & Okayasu, 2003; Fujieda & Aikawa, 2001). For example, Nakano and Sato (2013) explored the relationships between children's perceived quality of school life (the level of school adjustment) and their social skills among the lower secondary school children aged 12 – 15 years (256 boys and 273 girls). These researchers found that children who have a lower level of school adjustment, showed significantly lower level of social skills (pro-social behaviour, hesitation to take action and managing aggressive behaviours) over the children who have a higher level of school adjustment. This implies that children, who have a lower level of social skills, tend to have difficulties developing relationships with others. The studies indicate that there is a complex set of interactions amongst these characteristics. Of course, it may not be concluded that there is a direct causal link between lack of social skills and relationship difficulties. However, due to cultural and educational backgrounds, interrelationships among children (peers) seem to be related to their social skill levels in Japan where this is strongly influenced by the collectivism. In short, it seemed to be important for children to keep good peer relationships in their group and societies. In this sense, their social skills seemed to play a critical role in that purpose.

Several studies (Harada, 2011; Otsui & Tanaka-Matsumi, 2010; Arihara et al., 2009; Enai et al, 2006), designed to explore the relationship between children's social skills and their peer relations in school, have demonstrated similar results as other studies have

described above. In this vein, Nakahara (2012) summarised that various causes seemed to operate together to cause the current educational issues. He suggested that the issues need to be tackled from various points, which are education at school, at home and in local society. In terms of education at school, many researchers appear to place emphasis on children's level of school adjustment. Thus, researchers and educators have paid attention to Social and Emotional Learning programmes as a prevention method against such issues as bullying, school violence and school non-attendance.

As mentioned, the peer support is an approach that builds on characteristics of friendship such as helpfulness and altruism and extends it beyond individual friendships to the wider peer group. Children seem to benefit from receiving and delivering peer support activities; emotional and behavioural support, development of social skills, and enhancing altruistic attitudes and behaviours. It appears to be an effective approach to tackle the children's issues described, hence these approaches have been developed and implemented in recent years in Japan (Cowie & Kurihara, 2009). Although peer support has been quite extensively researched in the West using both quantitative and qualitative methods, which explored children's views and their behaviours, Japanese researchers mainly employed quantitative approaches with various assessment sheets and questionnaires to examine how peer support systems have a positive influence on children (e.g. the improvement of their social skills and the satisfaction levels in school life). In short, very little Japanese research explored the experiences of young people who practiced peer support by employing qualitative methods that captured their thoughts and feelings in depth. This resulted in a very limited knowledge about children's own views and insights, including their views on the peer support systems, their difficulties, feelings and motivations for the peer support activities. For these reasons, this study aims to explore the awareness of peer supporters based on their experiences through a thematic analysis. The present study has contributed to deepening the knowledge in these unrevealed research topics and issues.

II. Methodology

1. Aim & Objectives

To explore Japanese pupils' perspectives on the experience of being peer supporters in a school.

1. To explore the experiences of peer supporters
2. To explore any difficulties that children might experience in their role as a peer supporter
3. To explore why children adopt the role of peer supporter and whether they perceive any personal benefits in adopting this role

4. To identify differences in peer support practices between Rogers' model approach and the citizenship orientated approach.
5. To investigate how strongly cultural factors (e.g. collectivism) give influence on peer supporters' attitudes, thoughts and behaviours in their practices.

As stated, very little Japanese research has explored the experiences of young people who practice peer support. Also, since the Japanese educational system is very different from the system in the West, the present research aims to fill the gaps in the literature.

2. Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis is one of the methods of analysing qualitative data. Thematic analysis provides a rich, thematic characterisation of its data set whilst taking into account some differences or divergences between individual participants or cases. The author used a 'bottom-up' analytical process which made it easier to take these individual differences into account and the author identified its themes at a semantic rather than a latent level (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) outlined six stages to approaching thematic analysis of data which were adhered to in this study: becoming familiar with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing codes and themes; defining and naming themes; producing narrative results. The strength of thematic analysis is that an anecdotal approach to analysis is avoided, the themes identified require analysis rather than simple description and there must be coherence and balance between the quotes extracted and the analytical narrative, claims and interpretation.

3. Research sample

The samples were 14 lower secondary school pupils (year 8 and year 9) from a junior high school in Osaka. All of the peer supporters (in total 35 peer supporters) were invited to participate and eventually 14 (7 males and 7 females) took part in the present study.

4. Interviews

The one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in the beginning of the April 2013. Each interview took 30 to 60 minutes, and was digitally recorded. Before starting the interviews, all participants were orally given a brief explanation about the study. This includes their rights of withdrawing from the study. It took 4 days to complete 14 interviews (7 males and 7 females), where 3-4 interviews were conducted each day. After the interviews, each participant was given a UK scenery postcard as a token of gratitude for their time.

5. Transcript, data analysis and NVivo

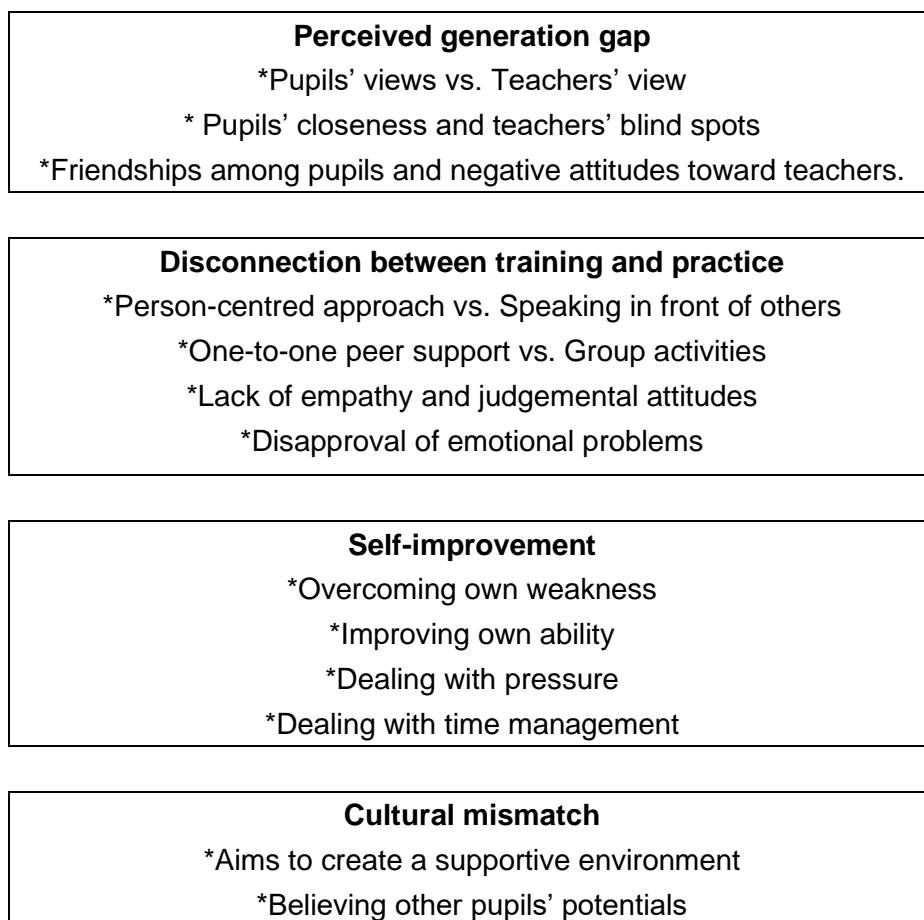
After the interviews, the verbatim transcripts of 14 interviewees (peer supporters) were formed within 2 months. The data analysis was based on Japanese transcripts by thematic analysis, then these were translated into English by the author. In short, the data analysis was based on original data (Japanese transcripts), which allowed the author to access rich data and examine it in depth by looking at patterns in each interview. This meant it was important not to lose any information through the process of the translation work from Japanese to English. However, through the analysis process, all Japanese transcripts were translated into English, thus the author's supervisors (two native English speakers in the UK) managed to read and check the process of coding. Both supervisors were specialised in health psychology and were well familiar with thematic analysis. This means both full English and Japanese transcripts (14 participants' interview data) are available for the supervisors and the author to read. NVivo (version 10) software was used to analyse the data. As a result, the author was able to import rich data (documents) into NVivo's database, allowing the author to create a database of responses in NVivo, edit code, search the responses and find the frequency of the usage of each coding.

6. Research setting

The present study was set in a lower secondary school in Osaka. This lower secondary school has around 700 pupils studying in the school and each year consists of 6 classes. There are 36 municipal primary and lower secondary schools (24 primary and 12 lower secondary schools) in this city, and in the last few years, all these schools have been employing peer support programmes. In 2007, all 12 lower secondary schools agreed to have the lower secondary school pupils' summit meeting, then, school council members from all the lower secondary schools occasionally gathered to hold meetings to discuss various pupils' issues. In the summit meeting, pupils shared their own peer support activities with other school pupils and also they made some joint projects such as "bullying prevention drama", "the pupils' summit training camp", and "the fund raising campaign for earthquake victims". In this lower secondary school, peer support activity has been organised as one of the club activities, and the selected volunteers were trained in peer support programme and took a lead for various peer-led activities. This research was conducted during three semesters (one year) and consisted of one-to-one semi-structured interview with the pupils (7 males and 7 females) and implementation of peer support training and activities. In Japan, the new school year generally starts in April, therefore, the commencement of peer support training and supporting activities was in May 2012, and one-to-one semi-structured interviewing was conducted at the beginning of April 2013, which was 11 months after the peer support scheme started. All the peer support training sessions and supporting activities were led by teachers who are qualified as a peer support trainer from the Japan Peer Support Association (JPSA).

III. Result and Discussion

Four main themes and a number of sub themes emerged from the findings (see Figure 1). These findings explain the nature of Japanese peer supporters from their perspective as well as critiquing this approach in Japan.



<Figure 1> Main themes & Sub themes

(Main themes in bold text, Sub themes are marked with an asterisk)

The following list summarises the characteristics of the peer supporters interviewed. To protect participants' confidentiality, all names have been changed into assumed names.

<Table 1> The characteristics of the peer supporters interviewed.

Participant 1 (girl, age 14)... Lucy	Participant 8 (boy, age 13)... Ken
Participant 2 (girl, age 14)... Ellie	Participant 9 (boy, age 14)... John
Participant 3 (girl, age 14)... Helen	Participant 10 (boy, age 14)... Dan
Participant 4 (girl, age 14)... Michelle	Participant 11 (boy, age 13)... Alex
Participant 5 (girl, age 14)... Sally	Participant 12 (boy, age 13)... Ben
Participant 6 (girl, age 13)... Cathy	Participant 13 (boy, age 14)... Paul
Participant 7 (girl, age 14)... Natalie	Participant 14 (boy, age 13)... Graham

1. Perceived generation gap

The first theme is “Perceived generation gap”. Peer supporters often mentioned their superiority over the teachers, and their perceived superiority seemed to be strongly related to a generation gap between teachers and pupils. The sub themes and some selected transcripts are presented below.

1) Pupils’ view vs. Teachers’ views

Peer supporters strongly believed they were in a good position to understand pupils’ views over the teachers. Several peer supporters mentioned how important it was for them to carry on peer support activities, in terms of pupils’ views.

“Well, there are age differences between the pupils and the teachers. Then, there are some gaps between teachers’ views are pupils’ views. Pupils are from the same generation, therefore I think pupils share similar views.” (John)

“Ummm.....sure enough, pupils’ views are different from teachers’ views...”

Um.....peer supporters are pupils as well.....so I think it is nicer to speak and take actions in terms of pupils’ views. Pupils listen to other pupils’ words more than teachers’ words, don’t they?” (Lucy)

“Teachers tend to mention they feel the same ways as we (pupils) feel. But in terms of pupils’ views, pupils doubt whether teachers just pretend to share the same feelings as pupils feel or not.” (Ken)

In the present study, peer supporters were not directly questioned about their strengths and effectiveness as a peer supporter, instead, they were questioned about “why do you

think we need peer support systems in school?”. Then, they kept mentioning how accurately they could understand pupils’ views, compared to the teachers’ ability of perception. This implied that peer supporters highly valued their role as a peer supporter because of their good understanding of pupils’ views over teachers.

2) Pupils’ closeness and Teachers’ blind spots

The peer supporters emphasised their superiority in communication with reference to their perception of “Teachers’ blind spots”. The interview data clearly indicated the fact that due to time constraints, communication between pupils and teachers was generally limited, which meant, peer supporters were able to spend more time with other pupils than teachers did.

“.....in our school.....there are not much.....but bullying happens somewhere teachers cannot see..” “When some pupils smoke cigarettes, they smoke somewhere the teachers cannot see them. But pupils know their deeds because we pupils usually share the same space in school.” “Except in special circumstances, we pupils stay in a class. When something bad happens, pupils can see and understand the issues. But teachers do not stay in a class room (they stay in a staff room)....” (Ellie)

“I think teachers cannot see some parts of pupils’ life and views. Thus, we need to have peer support systems in school to work for pupils.”“....There are a few hundred pupils in the school, but there are about 40 teachers. Therefore, it is very difficult for the teacher to see and understand the whole school.” (Paul)

As described by Ellie, some pupils went to somewhere beyond sight of the teacher before they engaged in forbidden activities such as smoking a cigarette. Despite this, peer supporters were often able to witness their engagements in forbidden activities. This kind of episode highlighted the teacher’s blind spots and confirmed that peer supporters had superiority over teachers in that there were more opportunities for peer supporters to see what was going on behind the scenes. As prior bullying studies (The Japanese Ministry of Education Japan, 2014; Yamawaki, 2006; Morita & Shimizu, 1994, etc.) mentioned, one of the characteristics of school bullying was “the invisibility of bullying”. Most bullying tended to occur out of eyeshot of teachers and school staff. This resulted in long delays in tackling bullying and offering support to children who were involved.

3) Friendships among pupils and negative attitudes toward teachers

The peer supporters believed that they had an advantage in relationships and friendships over teachers, which were reflected in various ways. The relationships sometimes seemed to be an important factor for peer supporters to smoothly encourage other pupils to join and take the lead in their activities. Especially, peer supporters believed they gained trust from other pupils, thus as a friend, they managed to encourage other pupils to join the activities successfully.

“Pupils are more motivated by other pupils’ encouragements than adults’ encouragements.” “Especially when the pupils were encouraged by reliable pupils, they would take actions.” (Cathy)

“Well...because pupils are easily inspired by other pupils’ encouragements, rather than the teacher’s encouragements.” (John)

In addition, the majority of peer supporters described that pupils tended to have negative views about their teachers because pupils were at the rebellious age (period of negativism), which has been recognised as a set of behavioural traits, especially for teenagers (Kokubu, 2003). Pupils often negatively perceived the teachers’ words, and also they tended to feel a sense of compulsion when teachers gave them advice. In terms of facilitating emotional and behavioural well-being in school, this tendency, typical of adolescents, made it difficult for pupils to follow teachers’ advice.

“Some noisy pupils do not care about the teacher’s words. They make light of teachers. They have negative feelings like “leave me alone” “kill you”...Therefore, when the teachers ask noisy pupils to be quiet, sometime they do not listen to teacher’s words. In this case, peer supporters try to settle an awkward situation pleasantly.” “Sometimes, (pupils’ words) are very influential.” “Generally, pupils’ encouragements are more influential.” (Ben)

“.....some pupils have rebellious attitudes toward teachers, because they reached the rebellious age. There is no rebellious age between pupils. Thus, when pupils give some advice to each other, most times pupils listen to their friends’ advice. “Pupils’ words are more influential” “Because many pupils are at a rebellious age and they tend to show rebellious attitudes towards teachers.” (Dan)

Moreover, peer supporters explained other reasons, which made it difficult for teachers to ask the pupils to do something and to communicate with pupils.

“when pupils join the activity, pupils do not want others think they are a teacher’s pet.....” (Graham)

Some pupils mentioned they do not want to be regarded as a teachers’ pet, thus they hesitated to follow the teachers’ orders. In terms of culture influence (collectivism), in Japan, social groups and peer pressure seemed to be critical factors for children to follow their friends’ behaviours and opinions. Pupils appeared to be keen on the power of peer pressure and social groups, and these strongly influenced individuals as well as groups in their daily life.

2. Disconnection between training and practice

The second theme is “disconnection between training and practice’. The present study indicated that there were major gaps and disconnections between peer supporters’ actual activities and their training sessions, which have not been reported as an issue in Japanese peer support studies.

1) Person-centre approach vs. Speaking in front of others

The interview data revealed that peer supporters did not use or adopt the person-centred approach for their daily activities. None of the peer supporters mentioned their experiences of being involved into one-to-one support in their school. Rather, peer supporters actively were engaged in other group activities, such as the greeting campaign, cleaning activities, volunteering activities (fund-raising activities) and anti-bullying dramas at both group support level and the whole-school support level. For example, peer supporters mentioned they often needed to give feedback in front of other pupils as one of peer supporter duties.

“...we give feedback of peer support activities in morning assembly. We let other pupils know how peer supporters are doing activities.” (Graham)

Generally peer supporters were trained to develop their basic counselling skills (i.e. active listening skills). Thus, they were supposed to provide one-to-one support with children who are in distress or have emotional difficulties. However, peer supporters did not mention any experiences of providing one-to-one support and did not demonstrate a person-centred approach with other pupils.

“Well, other pupils did not consult me much.” (Ken)

2) One-to-one peer support vs. Group activities

Peer supporters reported their various activities, which were mainly related to group activities. These group activities are widely used in Japanese schools as a method for enhancing responsibility for one's environment and for strengthening the norms of the group.

“Generally, class rooms were messy with waste papers. When we had a campus clean-up campaign, pupils kept the class rooms very clean and tidy. After the campaign, the class rooms remain as clean. (Alex)

“When I greet pupils, they reply to me as well. Thus everyone become brighter.” “When I said “good morning” to other pupils, some pupils bowed to me, but other pupils ignored me.....” “Ahhh....yes, little by little. At the beginning, when I said “good morning” to them, many pupils ignored me. But gradually pupils started to bow to me, and also said “good morning” in a small voice. They are getting better, I think” (Paul)

Regarding the types of peer support approach used in the UK, Houlston et al (2009) indicated that many secondary schools were engaged in individual support level activities, such as “Befriending” (73.2%), “Mentoring” (84.5%), “Mediation” (45.4%), “Counselling” (30.9%), and “Others” (8.2%). Unfortunately, no Japanese studies have investigated the breakdown of the types of peer support, therefore, it is difficult to make even a wild guess about the extent to which Japanese peer supporters engage in helping behaviours, whether with individuals or groups. However, the present study indicated that there was no reported evidence that any one-to-one peer support actually took place. In terms of Hofstede's theory (2005), school activities and schemes have been influenced by the cultural context directly and indirectly, thus it is natural that peer support activities have also been linked to and affected by the cultural values and social contexts (e.g. collectivism). However, by no stretch of the imagination can their observed group activities be defined as a part of peer support activities which are commonly used in the West. A more accurate definition of these activities would be that they form part of citizenship education and/or personal and social development (PSD) for the pupils. Otherwise, it may be necessary to specify its styles and definitions as Japanese style peer support activities in order to avoid confusion.

3) Lack of empathy and judgemental attitudes

The present study found that the peer supporters did not have much opportunities to adopt the person-centred approach for their daily activities. Thus, it appears that they did

not need to adopt some specific qualities and attitudes, such as “respectful”, “non-judgemental”, and “willing to admit to mistakes”, which were gained by most peer supporters to follow Rogers’ model of peer support. In terms of their activities, peer supporters needed to take the lead for the activities, which seemed to encourage them to play a role as one of monitoring and policing deviant pupils rather than providing emotional support for pupils with relationship difficulties. In fact, the present study found that Japanese peer supporters tended to show their negative and judgemental views about other pupils and also their attitudes and comments seemed to lack empathy. There were some pupils who did not want to join and follow the peer support activities. Peer supporters tended to show their negative views and judgemental attitudes towards other pupils easily.

“....on the other hand, pupils who do not actively join, stick at nothing and lack endurance. They tend to do something different one after another. They focus only their enjoyable things.” (Ben)

“They (pupils) are reluctant to.....because they think other pupils should do it....” (Sally)

4) Disapproval of emotional problems

The early detection of children’s emotional and behavioural problems is essential for tackling the issues more effectively and successfully. Peer support, as an anti-bullying method, is widely viewed in the literature as playing a critical role in providing support for victims of bullying and identifying bullying incidents at an early stage. Since all peer supporters had received the training sessions, they were supposed to be sensitive to pupils’ emotional and behavioural issues, especially bullying. However, the present study showed that only one peer supporter (Helen), out of fourteen interviewed reported that there was any bullying in their school.

“...in my class, everyone has good relationships.....currently peer support activities focus on bullying issues. However, we do not have bullying in my class. Pupils from other schools mentioned there are some bullying issues, but there is no bullying in our school...” (Ellie)

“No, we do not have it (bullying). Everyone speak to others very friendly.” (John)

“Bullying.....well.....what can I say.....well.....to tell the truth, some pupils in my grade are involved in bullying. Well.....ummmm....some teachers know some pupils who are bullied.” “.....teachers have been asking the pupils who are bullied, about bullying. But these pupils do not tell the truth. Because they think if they tell the truth about bullying, bullies may revenge on them. Thus, these pupils do not tell the truth and this do not help to solve the bullying issues.” (Helen)

Japanese peer supporters seemed to focus on some other duties and roles (peer-led group activities), rather than engaging with individual emotional and behavioural problems. Thus, the majority of peer supporters clearly stated that there was no bullying without hesitation. These results may also suggest that the school already has a supportive environment and good school ethos, which prevented the school bullying.

3. Self-improvement

The third theme is “Self-improvement”. In particular, the findings highlighted four major benefits, which were “Overcoming own weakness”, “Improving own ability”, “Dealing with pressure”, and “Dealing with time management”.

1) Overcoming own weakness

Many peer supporters explained their attitudes and feelings about how they were able to overcome their shyness and nervousness.

“I need to practice again and again, then I gain confidence ...Eventually I can dispel my feeling of uneasiness.” (Michelle)

“Umm...I believe, if I was not a peer supporter, I could not have experienced to speak in front of people...” “I could overcome my shyness. Now I am not nervous to speak in front of people.” (John)

“...I was a shy person.” “I am still shy when I speak in front of many people” “In days gone by, I was able to speak only in front of my friends unashamedly. However, now I am able to speak in front of all my class mates when I need to speak to them.” “Also I am able to behave with confidence.” (Cathy)

Since peer supporters tended to retain their strong wills, these struggles seemed to be opportunities to foster their inner strengths and encourage their emotional and behavioural developments.

2) Improving own ability

Several peer supporters shared similar experiences, which they were able to make efforts or work harder for something in their daily life, outside peer support activities. They believed that these changes were accelerated as a result of being a peer supporter, and it seemed that their experiences as a peer supporter enriched their resilience, which gave positive influences on their life in various ways. As an example, many peer supporters reported that their school records have been improved after being a peer supporter, even though they have faced time management issues. Also some peer supporters mentioned that they regarded the experience as a process to grow up to be a fine adult. In fact, several peer supporters felt they became matured.

“..I feel less nervous...so I think when I am grown up in the future, I am able to do it.. “I believe I became a little more grown-up. So I think my attitude has changed...what can I say, I became fearless” (Alex)

“.....at first I was nervous to stand in front of people, gradually I get used to it now. I think this experience will be useful when I become an adult.” (Paul)

“.....before becoming a peer supporter, if I was tired, I tended to go to bed easily. But now I make an effort to study even for 5 minutes (before sleeping), and also I try to study in break time in school. I can wisely use free time, then my studies are going well. Eventually this makes it easier for me to attend ballet class as well” (Helen)

“I could improve my ability to memorise something.” “Also, I improved my school records.” “At the exams, I really used to gain only about 200 points in total, but now I can gain about 400 points.” “I was praised by the teachers. I was happy about it.” (Ellie)

Peer supporters highlighted that their experiences of being a peer supporter helped them improve their school records and other achievements. They believed these improvements were strongly connected to their positive attitudes and tireless efforts, which seemed to be developed through peer support activities.

3) Dealing with pressure

Many peer supporters felt pressure from both pupils and teachers, which generally made peer supporters feel uncomfortable. "Pressure" was seldom raised as a research topic in Japanese peer support literature. Only a few papers reported it from peer supporters' feedback after the training sessions and activities (e.g. Kamiya, 2007). Peer supporters described that they felt pressurized to behave in an appropriate manner and meet the high expectations of being a peer supporter. Several peer supporters shared their experiences of this pressure, where other pupils and teachers said, "Because you are a peer supporter, so you should make effort to..." Peer supporters thought they were still pupils and they did not want to be regarded as something different from other pupils. However, they were used to being seen as a special figure in the school.

"Sometimes I am told by other pupils, "you can manage to do anything" I do not like this. Pupils said "because you are a peer supporter, you can do it....." I do not like this." (Ben)

"Uh...the teacher asked me to answer the questions because I was a peer supporter...In my class, there were three peer supporters. The teachers often asked us to answer the questions, then we needed to speak.....it happened. This means I needed to be in front of people and feel tense...." (Lucy)

In a sense, these expectations amplified their nervousness and shyness. However, peer supporters tirelessly made efforts to challenge their own pressured situations. From the prior studies, the experiences of being a peer supporter seemed to contribute to their social, emotional and behavioural developments (Yamada & Mori, 2010; Kamigaki, 2009; Takahasi & Kurihara, 2006). This implied that even under the pressured situations, peer supporters developed their own skills through their activities.

4) Dealing with time management

Most peer supporters were struggling with time management, which was an unexpected result as a difficulty of peer supporters. The literature hardly showed any issues related to time management of peer supporters as a topic. Peer supporters were often required to spend time during their break and before/after school started on peer support activities. Consequently, this impacted on the time they had to participate in club activities, go to cram school (Juku), and to participate in social activities with friends.

“So, that is.....I could not attend the club activities. Because I need to attend the peer support activities, I missed many opportunities to attend the club activities.” (Alex)

“.....peer supporters often need to do their activities after school. The volunteer activities are generally carried out during the lunch break, thus it is fine. But peer supporters need to do some preparations and activities after school, thus it would be late to go home. Therefore, pupils do not want to be a peer supporter.” (Ben)

There are two possible reasons why the peer supporters' time management issue has not appeared on the centre stage of the literature. Firstly, most Japanese research was conducted in terms of adult's perspectives, meaning these did not consider the pupils' feelings and experiences in deeper levels. A few studies (e.g. Kondo, 2008; Okada, 2005) mentioned time consuming or time management issues with peer support programmes. However, these studies simply explained supervisors' time issues, which showed supervisors struggled to secure a time-slot for skill training and supervisions. Accordingly, the previous studies seldom discussed peer supporters' time issues in deeper levels (in terms of children's perspectives). Secondly, pupils did not consider time management as a difficulty. The results of the present study showed that peer supporters tend to positively challenge their difficulties and overcome them. This finding seems to be consistent with previous research, which found that training and supporting activities, developed peer supporters' communication skills, amplifying their self-esteem and self-efficacy to actively challenge their issues and difficulties (Okada, 2005). Thus, peer supporters tend not to think of time management as a difficulty, rather, they think of it as the inevitable process to carry out their peer support activities. Several peer supporters mentioned that the time dedicated to their extra responsibilities was a good opportunity for them to learn how to use time wisely.

“In order to effectively work for both peer support and club activities, I have tried to use time wisely.” “I would take measures suited to the occasion.” (Paul)

4. Cultural mismatch

The fourth theme is “Cultural mismatch”. As Hofstede et al. (2010) argued, there are cultures in which children and young people from the earliest years are integrated into strongly cohesive in-groups. This might explain why the Japanese interpretation of peer support seemed to appear completely different from the Western style approach, based on Carl Rogers' individualistic model. Probably the researchers in the Western nations would

not believe these Japanese style peer support practices were classified as the peer support approach. Rather they may think these were a kind of citizenship education or social skills training. This study found two cultural tendencies of peer supporters as sub themes that seemed to strongly influence the interpretation of the Western style approach: “aim to create supportive environments”, and “believing other pupils’ potential”.

1) Aims to create a supportive environment

Because of the culture influences, peer supporters potentially think supportive environments would strongly give positive influences to each individual. In this sense, rather than providing one-to-one support to a pupil, it seemed to be more beneficial to make behavioural changes in peer relationships among pupils.

“...in some groups.....thus if the central person changed himself, then other pupils around him follow him and they also change themselves.” (Helen)

“.....we pupils plan the things and take actions...this would raise our morale as a whole.....also there are some pupils who are supportive... what can I say.....peer supporters.....each peer supporter receives support from pupils around them. Morale of the whole school would be raised.” (Michelle)

“.....even I cannot join the cleaning activities, I thought someone else would do that. But I saw some senior peer supporters were working very hard to encourage other pupils to join the activities. When I saw someone is working hard for us, I thought I wanted to give some help. In my point of view, this kind of episode made me join peer support activities...” (Ellie)

Peer supporters seemed to wisely use peer pressure and the power of group norms in order to give positive influences to other pupils and a whole school.

“... two particular girls were always chatting during class. Most of the time some other pupils also were chatting in a small voice during class, therefore these girls did not care about this lesson and others..... But one day, the classroom was so quiet. Nobody talked at all. Then these girls, who used to chat, did not chat at all and tried to be quiet”.....“Therefore, if we can wisely use friends’ influences, this may be applied to improve a whole school. (Helen)

2) Believing other pupils' potentials

Most peer supporters were able to overcome their own weakness, therefore, they believe other pupils are also able to challenge their own issues.

“Because when we started doing the peer support activities, we could not do well....which means we have the same potential as other pupils have. Through the peer support activities, we could grow, therefore we believe other pupils would grow as well. That’s the reason why, there are no differences.” (Lucy)

Because of their own experiences, peer supporters tended to believe other pupils could develop themselves both emotionally and behaviourally. In this sense, even peer supporters encouraged pupils who were in distress, to join the activities. This view seemed to be accepted in Japanese schools, and eventually keep the peer support approaches away from the Western style approach. In Japan, even though scholars and researchers had been learning its concepts and approaches from the western style peer support approach, they had developed their own views and approaches due to the educational needs and cultural backgrounds. Cowie and Kurihara (2009) stated that peer support programmes had been developed with influence of two different views; 1) “Counselling model view” whose emphasis is to emotionally care and look after children in distress and 2) “Educational model view” which is to provide children with social skills for preventing them from being in troubled situations. In Japan, peer supporters were often involved in activities at group and whole-school support levels. This had been reflected by “Educational model view” which support the desire that children have the opportunity to receive and participate in the beneficial training and group activities. Salmivalli’s participant role theory (1999) is also useful in understanding the impact of peer support in Japan. Essentially, the peer supporters in the role of defenders are helping the whole school, in particular the bystanders, who have the potential to influence whether children are bullied or whether they are protected. The defender role is expressed differently in Japan as compared to the West. For example, as the interviews showed, rather than supporting individuals with difficulties, the peer supporters created structures for the groups and social networks within the school so that the group would challenge bullying and other forms of discrimination. Participant role theory emphasises the power of the group in understanding the phenomenon of bullying and thus peer supporters in the defender role play a critical part in activating other people’s potential for prosocial behaviour. The majority of children are bystanders (in the outsider participant role) so the social activities of the peer supporters in the present study are very influential in changing behaviour and attitudes in a positive way. This process is likely to be sustained over time as the impact is on the group rather than the individual.

IV. Conclusion

The present study revealed and discussed some critical key issues in Japanese peer support practices. Four main themes and several sub themes greatly assisted to explore the unrevealed children's views, and some critical issues of peer support practices in Japan and also confirmed the findings of quantitative studies (prior studies). Some practical recommendations for the peer support activities are suggested in terms of the findings below.

Suggestions

Firstly, in terms of differences in key features (types of training, attitudes and skills, types of main activities, and main objectives), Japanese style peer support and the Western style peer support should be clearly recognised as differing in philosophy, approach and content. Some Japanese style peer support did not match the Western style peer support at all. These citizenship orientated approaches (e.g. greeting campaigns, clearing campaign, fund-raising activities, and anti-bullying drama) are unique to the Japanese peer support practices (still classified as peer support in Japan), which allows peer supporters to have an active role as a facilitator in peer-led activities. In this vein, two different qualities of peer support activities exist in Japan; one is based on the person-centred approach (role as a counsellor) and the other is based on citizenship orientated approach (role as a group leader). For this reason, it may be necessary to specify a more accurate definition of these activities as Japanese style peer support activities in order to avoid confusion.

Secondly, the teachers and the researchers (from JPSA) need to reform the contents of the training session, which match the requirements for these peer-led activities. As mentioned above, because of the differences in key features, it seems to be necessary to modify its training contents, which suit to its main activities and main objectives.

Thirdly, it is necessary for schoolteachers (peer support coordinators) to pay more attention to children's challenges and difficulties, especially, peer supporters' time management and peer pressure issues.

The present study, although small, demonstrates the nature of peer support in Japan and peer supporters' views, which would contribute to a better understanding of knowledge in prior studies.

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