From the Classroom to the Community: Peer Relationships in an Ecological Context

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ABSTRACT
Previous scholarship has identified factors that can influence peer relationships at the classroom level, while others have noted how school-level characteristics and practices can impact the interactions among young people. Little scholarship, however, has addressed the connections between these school systems as well as to the wider community. Moreover, few studies have offered a qualitative analysis of peer relationships in varied settings. To address this gap, this study draws on data gathered among educators and students from two secondary schools in New York State to better understand the various influences on peer relationships. In this analysis, we draw on social-ecological theory to demonstrate how elements from the various systems in which youth participate impact peer relationships in these schools. Our contribution offers practical value for educators and policymakers seeking to improve relationships among youth while providing a qualitative contribution to a topic that has largely been examined through quantitative analysis.

KEYWORDS: adolescents, teachers, mentoring, extracurricular, Bronfenbrenner.

Prior research has indicated that peer relationships are crucial influences in the lives of youths and can have a significant impact on their academic performance and social-emotional well-being (Brown & Larson, 2009; Uslu & Gizir, 2017; Yu et al., 2018). In seeking to understand how positive peer relationships are nurtured in schools, researchers have found that a myriad of factors at both the classroom level as well as in schoolwide characteristics and programs may impact the quality of peer interactions (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Varga & Zaff, 2018; Wentzel et al., 2009). This scholarship, while valuable, has generally treated these systems (classrooms, schools, communities) as separate spheres rather than dynamically interacting to impact the ways in which youth relate to one another in school settings. Moreover, few qualitative analyses of peer relationships exist that feature both the voices of educators and students.

This study addresses this gap in the research literature by drawing on a multi-phase case study of two secondary schools in New York State. Although these schools are located in different community contexts and serve demographically different student populations, both were selected for this study due to their statistically better-than-expected graduation rates among different subgroups of students. The overarching purpose of the study was to discover what leaders, educators, and young people understood as impactful in readying youth for college or careers. Among the most salient themes in this research was the high value both educators and students placed on relationships with one another as well as between their peers (Wilcox et al., 2020). In

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this embedded analysis we draw on social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2005) to demonstrate how elements from the various systems in which youth participate—classrooms, schools, and communities—impact peer relationships in these schools.

As these data demonstrate, teachers and young people in these schools characterized peer relationships as generally respectful and harmonious, and they provide a number of examples of programs, practices, and opportunities that helped foster positive peer relationships. Because this study utilizes data from both educators and students, these findings provide valuable insights into how youth and adult relationships are related to each other while offering a nuanced view of how these relationships are encouraged in two dissimilar school contexts. Our contribution offers practical value for educators and policymakers seeking to improve relationships among youth while providing a qualitative contribution to a topic that has largely been examined through quantitative analysis. This research is particularly timely as the COVID-19 pandemic has heightened policymakers', researchers', educators', and the public's collective awareness regarding the import of relationships between youth and their peers as well as youth and school staff (Fay et al, 2020; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021).

The Importance of Peers

Psychologists and sociologists have noted for nearly a century that peer relationships have important effects on the social-emotional health and academic development of youths (Coleman, 1961; Piaget, 1932). Although Johnson (1981) described peer relationships as a "neglected variable" in educational research, decades of research since his declaration has reaffirmed their importance (p. 5). As numerous scholars have asserted, peers become more influential in comparison to parents and family members as children grow into adolescents and young adults (Brown & Larson, 2009; Melton et al., 2021; Steinberg et al., 1997). Academic motivation and engagement may decline during this same period making the impact of peer relationships on academic performance and social-emotional well-being even more salient (Eccles et al., 1993; Ryan & Patrick, 2001). During adolescence and young adulthood, peers also serve as an important influence on the development of identities as individuals come to understand themselves through their interactions with others (Branje, 2018; Parker & Asher, 1993; Scholte & van Aken, 2006).

Researchers have found correlations between positive peer relationships and numerous academic and social-emotional outcomes (Stotsky & Bowker, 2018). Supportive relationships among peers are positively associated with academic achievement, academic motivation, prosocial behavior, and school engagement (Altermatt & Pomerantz, 2003; Li et al., 2011). Peers can thus provide one another with a source of emotional support and help youth manage adversities (Moses & Villodas, 2017; Sanders et al., 2017). Attitudes towards school are also heavily influenced by peers as early as kindergarten, and youths' views of school are linked with variable levels of academic engagement and achievement (Ladd & Coleman 1997; Ladd et al., 1996). In a national survey of adolescents, for instance, Vaquera and Kao (2008) found that close relationships with peers were related to feelings of school belonging and attachment. A stronger sense of school belonging, in turn, can also foster school engagement (Juvonen et al., 2012). Students who feel that their classmates are both academically and emotionally supportive have been found to display higher levels of social behavior and exhibit better rates of attendance and class participation (Murdock, 1999; Wentzel & Battle, 2001). In addition, positive relationships with peers can promote social and emotional skills such as perspective-taking and empathy, as well as instill a sense of confidence and self-esteem (Hamre & Pianta, 2001; Portt et al., 2020; Wentzel et al., 2009).

In contrast, negative peer interactions can harm students' motivation and engagement in school, and consequently their academic performance (e.g., Becker & Luthar, 2002; Finn, 1993). Young people who experience conflicts with friends or who are rejected by their peers may experience both academic difficulties as well as increased rates of absenteeism and truancy (Beale et al., 2018; DeRosier et al., 1994). Negative perceptions of peers are also correlated with weaker feelings of school belonging, lower levels of school engagement, and higher rates of school suspension (Ladd, 1990; Li et al., 2011; Sanders et al., 2017).

Peer Relationships in an Ecological Context

Researchers have long noted the strong influence that educators have on peer relationships (Epstein, 1983; Furrer et al., 2014; Juvonen, 2018). At the classroom level, positive peer interactions can be facilitated by teachers through both direct communications about behavioral expectations as well as the instructional approaches they take (Braun et al., 2019; Farmer et al., 2011). In discussing the "peer ecology" of classrooms, scholars have demonstrated that students who work cooperatively on projects and are grouped heterogeneously are less likely to be socially isolated or rejected (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Melton et al., 2021; Rodkin & Ryan, 2012; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Others have noted how learner-centered practices where students are engaged in decision-making processes can facilitate more positive peer interactions than teacher-centered approaches (Braun et al., 2019; Donohue et al., 2003). Similarly, Roseth and colleagues (2008) found that relationships between peers are improved when teachers structure academic goals cooperatively (rather than in competitive or individualistic ways). Educators impact peer relationships in indirect ways as well. Teachers' expectations of individual students and their behavior towards them can influence the way they are treated by peers (Harper & McCluskey, 2003). Students who are regarded negatively by their teachers, for instance, are more likely to be rejected by peers (Hughes et al., 2006; Juvonen, 2018).

Although there is less research concerning the ways school-level variables affect peer relationships (Wentzel & Edelman, 2016), there is some evidence that has shown how policies, practices, and programs can impact the ways in which peers interact with one another (Juvonen, 2018; Wentzel, 2017; Wentzel et al., 2012). Policies that promote prosocial values and understanding as well as the utilization of conflict resolution programs rather than punitive approaches to discipline can facilitate positive peer relationships (Battistich et al., 1995). Extracurricular opportunities can also help increase positive peer interactions. Mahoney (2000) found that student participation in extracurriculars is associated with higher levels of student engagement and school attendance as well as a decline in rates of dropout. Others have found that a closer connection with school can be fostered through extracurriculars (Brown & Evans, 2002; Dotterer et al., 2007). Such opportunities, along with practices such as heterogenous class groupings, can help ensure that students interact with a wide range of their peers and thus help disrupt cliques (Wentzel, 2017). Such policies, programs, practices, and extracurricular opportunities all support a positive school climate that can in turn promote higher levels of peer acceptance and the propensity for adolescents to make friends (Donohue et al., 2003).

The scholarship on peer relationships discussed above, however, has generally explored the influences on peer relationships at either the level of the classroom or through schoolwide practices and programs; little work has explored the connection between these contexts and the ways in which they may interact to affect the relationships between peers (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Furthermore, few studies offer insights into the ways positive peer relationships can be fostered from both the perspectives of educators and young people. With this gap in mind, this paper draws on two in-depth case studies of secondary schools to address the

following research questions: How do teachers and young adults in these schools characterize relationships among their peers? What programs, practices, and opportunities influence peer relationships in these schools? In what follows, we demonstrate how an ecologically-informed view of peer relationships can elucidate the various factors which interact to affect the relationships among students.

Theoretical Framework

This study utilizes Bronfenbrenner's (2005) social-ecological theory which situates youths' development within a series of nested systems. From an ecological perspective, individuals are influenced by immediate contexts—what Bronfenbrenner refers to as "microsystems"—which consist of the relationships and sites closest to individuals such as family, friends, and peers as well as by distal environments in which events occur that influence the development of youth. "Mesosystems" are comprised of several microsystems and the interactions and relationships of its various members within or across them. These systems interact dynamically and on a continuum between synergy and conflict. In this framework, individuals are conceived as agentic participants who are not carried along by these systems but take an active part in contributing to them and regulating their influences. "Meso"-systems may consist of locations such as schools where educators interact with youth in classrooms and with youths' family members at sports and other extracurricular events (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Bronfenbrenner calls more distal elements "exosystems" which can include state federal policy as well as the wider economic and cultural contexts which bear on the lives of individuals (Wilcox et al., 2014). Lastly, macrosystems—which Bronfenbrenner (2005) defines as "the overarching patterns of stability at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, in forms of social organization and associated belief systems and lifestyles" (p. 47)—can affect the ways in which individuals at other levels interact despite existing at the highest level of abstraction.

An ecological perspective is useful in understanding peer relationships as it situates these relationships within varied social contexts which include classrooms, schools, and communities (Brown, 2004). For instance, a range of work has examined influences on the classroom "peer ecology" (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Rodkin & Gest, 2010), while others have focused on school-level impacts on peer relations (Wentzel, 2017; Wentzel & Edelman, 2016). Yet these analyses rarely connect these micro-systems despite the fact that such spheres do not exist in isolation but interact with one another dynamically (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Varga & Zaff, 2018). As both the findings below illustrate, peer relationships are influenced by factors ranging from pedagogical approaches, school policies, and other sets of relationships such as between teachers and students, among educators themselves, and by feelings of attachment to the wider community.

Methods

Data Collection

Data for this paper is drawn from a two-phase research study aimed at understanding college and career readiness in secondary schools across New York State. In the first phase of this study, we used both Regents and Advanced Regents (New York State's exit exams) graduation rates to identify participating schools as these are the available metrics used to assess college and career readiness and are common across all schools in New York State. Specifically, we used the percentages of a 9th-grade cohort that earned a Regents Diploma or an Advanced Regents Diploma either four or five years later and these were based on three successive cohorts of 9th graders –

2010, 2011, and 2012 – graduating in four or five years, that is, 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017. As a result, seven schools were selected as "positive outliers" because their graduation outcomes (particularly Advanced Regents indicating college readiness) among African American/Black, Hispanic/Latino, English language learners, or economically disadvantaged students were significantly better than schools with similar demographics in New York State.

During this first phase of research, an interdisciplinary research team of faculty and doctoral students conducted interviews and focus groups with district and school leaders, teachers, and student support professionals. Policy, curriculum, and instructional documents were also collected, and school tours were conducted over the course of multi-day site visits. A schoolwide climate survey was also distributed to staff members at each participating school.

The second phase of this study was designed to focus on student participants. Of the original seven schools, Crown Point Central School and Malverne High School (school names identified with IRB and participant consent; all students have been assigned pseudonyms) were chosen for the second phase of the study. These schools were chosen because they represented two different geographic regions and were demographically dissimilar. Crown Point, for instance, is a relatively small, rural school with little ethnic and linguistic diversity and above-average economic disadvantage (i.e., poverty) in contrast to Malverne's more diverse micropolitan suburban profile (see Table 1 below for demographics).

Table 1
School Demographics

School	Enrollment	Grade Span	Urbanicity	%Economically Disadvantaged	%English Language Learner	%Hispanic/ Latino	%Black/ African American
Crown Point Central School	75	K-12	Rural	61	0	0	0
Malverne High School	548	9-12	Suburban	51	2	24	54
New York State	N/A	N/A	N/A	57	9	27	17

During the second phase, researchers made additional site visits to the two sample schools to conduct focus groups and interviews with juniors and seniors (11 students in each school). Invitations to participate in this research were sent to all juniors and seniors at each school (n=70). Out of the total responses (n=33), researchers engaged in purposeful sampling by selecting participants based on a variety of characteristics and post-secondary plans (e.g., technical/vocational training, military, or college) as well as a mixture of other personal characteristics (e.g., gender, ethnicity, language background). The research team audio recorded (with parental consent and assent) these one-hour-long interviews and focus groups in private locations in the school building. During interviews, researchers prompted student participants to draw on chart paper and use post-it notes to indicate places of import to them in and outside of school (called "ecological-maps"). The research team also prompted students to draw on chart paper and use post-it notes to indicate key events during high school on a timeline. In addition, the team collected documents from school websites and in hard copies such as code of conduct

manuals, program descriptions, and school event calendars. Over the course of these two phases, 43 educators, 14 leaders, and 22 students from these two schools featured in this manuscript participated in interviews and/or focus groups for this study, and survey responses were collected from 81 staff members.

Data Analysis

Analysts coded data deductively (using a priori categories based on the theoretical framing and literature review) as well as inductively (when new codes were emergent and fell outside the a priori categories). This technique, referred to as a constant-comparative method, allows for analytic flexibility as the analyst identifies unexpected categories and dimensions of those categories (Miles et al., 2014). For both phases of this study, the process of analysis and interpretation of data occurred in several stages to address reliability, credibility, and transferability threats inherent to qualitative research outlined below (Yin, 2014):

First, one analyst coded a single interview and a single focus group (typically amounting to 15 pages of text) utilizing NVivo qualitative data analysis software and generated the initial codebook, a combination of a priori codes and emergent "grounded" codes. Next, other analysts coded these same two source files using the same codebook. The analysts ran an intercoder reliability check across coded files (again using the NVivo software) in order to address threats to internal consistency/reliability. Intercoder reliability measured at 85-90%.

Then, using a refined and agreed–upon codebook, and once all data coding was completed, analysts drew code reports from NVivo and generated data matrices, including major patterns within cases organized in axial codes (i.e., themes), so that cross-case comparisons could be made. Throughout this stage, analysts engaged in triangulation across all data sources including documents, student-crafted artifacts (e.g., ecological maps), and researcher-generated interpretive memos completed during and after the data collection. Negative evidence, or outlier data, was sought and noted in the data matrices, and researcher memos addressed rival explanations for all interpretations of both patterns and anomalies (Rihoux & Ragin, 2008). At least two analysts generated a descriptive case study of the school case, thus engaging in researcher triangulation. The analysts shared the case studies with participants, requesting feedback on any inaccuracies, thus engaging in member checking and confirmation of the quality of data and interpretations. Any inaccuracies or misinterpretations were discussed until analysts and participants were in agreement regarding the final version of the report (Maxwell, 2012). No notable and substantive changes to interpretations and only minor adjustments to language (e.g., correction of acronyms) were required.

In the final stage of analysis, researchers returned to the most salient themes evident across both cases. Among the most prominent findings were the ways students described their relationships with peers and that these descriptions closely mirrored the descriptions of collegiality among educators found in the first study phase. Code reports pertinent to this theme were drawn from both phases of study and compared across cases in order to understand the programs, practices, and opportunities which contributed to the positive descriptions of peer relationships at each school.

Findings

Crown Point Central School

Crown Point is located in the rural "North Country" of New York State and is home to just over 2,000 individuals. Surrounded by countryside, small villages, and towns, the town of Crown Point sits a few hours" drive from the state capital (Albany) and other mid-large size cities such as Plattsburgh and Burlington. Crown Point Central School is a PK-12 building in the center of town that functions as the hub for community events and activities. At Crown Point, we noted how schoolwide practices, programs, and shared values fostered positive peer relationships (Wilcox et al., 2018). Several extracurricular programs also connected youth to the wider community and influenced the ways in which peers understood their relationships with one another. In Bronfenbrenner's terms, these findings illustrate the interaction between meso-level and micro-level systems and suggest that such factors should be analyzed holistically rather than in isolation (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

A Shared Culture of Collaboration

Collaborative and collegial relationships were evident among both students and educators at Crown Point. In interviews, educators described the "close-knit" and supportive relationships between colleagues. As the superintendent explained, "Our teachers are very willing to participate together, and we have created some shared prep time—common planning time is actually the official word—so that they can work together for the common goal and cause for the kids in the area that they serve." Teachers corroborated this point:

> *I'm not afraid to go to [school leaders] and say, 'I have an issue, I have a problem, you know, what can we do about this?' "We tend to work together to come up with the best solution we can as a group.*

A schoolwide survey of staff validated these comments as 97 percent of respondents reported "feeling accepted and respected by most staff members" and 100 percent reported, "working together to ensure the needs of students are met." Educators even felt their own collegial relationships had positive effects on students. As one teacher explained, "I think [students] see that from the staff too. I think the staff has been a very good model for the students. Everyone's always supporting each other with friendly voices and friendly faces and just really good teamwork."

Students at Crown Point responded similarly about their school climate and culture, often using the words "close-knit" and "small" to describe it. During a focus group, for instance, students were asked to describe their school in a few words and write those down on post-it notes. Alex, a Crown Point senior, wrote "small, close-knit group, family, comfortable" and explained why she had chosen those words, "Because it's such a small community around here that in the school, it is another small community within itself. So, like almost everybody knows almost everyone, and for the most part, we all get along." Jessica, a junior, responded similarly: "Everybody [at Crown Point] is in one big peer group." A senior named Mackenzie reiterated the same message and contrasted other schools with Crown Point, "Like in big schools there is bullying, but in our school, a lot of us are just friends with everyone. I would describe our school as friendly, and we're welcoming to new people." As the following sections demonstrate, these positive peer relationships were supported and facilitated through a number of programs and practices that connected the classroom, school, and community.

The Importance of Peer Mentoring

At Crown Point, mentoring programs helped facilitate positive relationships between peers. "Everyone in our building is a mentor: the secretaries, the administration, the school nurse," explained one educator. Formal programs such as "Panther Mentors" pairs a group of students with a staff member where students can discuss expectations for social relationships and behavior. The groups meet monthly during one of the extended-day periods to discuss positive `character values and provide other social or academic support. Within these groups, students also mentor each other about appropriate ways of dealing with problems, behaving, and setting goals. The names of their mentees are displayed on educators" office or classroom doors. "We want [students] to know that this is where they belong," explained one teacher, adding, "It is not just certain groups. These kids need a mentor; these kids need an adult to be able to go to." Another teacher added, "They're realizing they're not alone with their problem," one teacher explained, "and it seems so much smaller to them when they're done talking about it with other kids their age." In another program, Crown Point seniors are paired as "buddies" with Kindergarteners to provide academic and social supports. Several teachers described the seniors and Kindergarteners giving each other high-fives in the hallway:

> *There are a lot of hellos in the hallways, even between elementary [and high school students] because our students have to come through this side of the building to get to the gym, for example. You see the older students saying "hi" to the younger students by name even if they are not related.*

Interviews with students revealed the effects of these programs on peer relationships. A senior named Kyle, for instance, understood that students at Crown Point—especially juniors and seniors—are expected to "start a chain reaction to have good behavior everywhere." Alex explained how mentoring works in Crown Point in the following way: "They [adults] use the [student] leaders to help show the younger students or students who haven't experienced certain things how to act in a way. But they know that they can trust us to be that role model." Another senior named Jake acknowledged the impact that older students can have on the younger students:

> *[Teachers] always remind us of all the little; when the smaller kids walk through to go to the gym or go to certain specials or whatever, they always see us in the halls. And they're always like looking up to us. And I never really fully grasped that idea until our show that we had last year, and then you could hear all the little kids the week after saying all the lines from the show. That's when it really hit me, "Wow they really do look up to us."*

Other students at Crown Point described the positive effect that peers had on their own behaviors. Several students provided examples of helping peers in classes or with activities. A junior named Lucas, for example, explained how his friend served as a role model for him to emulate:

> *My good friend [name], he's one of the smartest kids in the class, and I look up to him. He has a leadership role already because everybody looks up to and is always looking to him for help. So, I figured why not step up and try to be like him and help people when they need it – whether it be homework or something personal.*

When asked for an example of how he acted as a leader in school, Lucas described spontaneously helping a classmate to prepare for New York's graduation exams:

> *Going into the Regents [Exams], there was a girl in the class who didn't know what she was doing on her homework, and she was asking for help, so I went and sat with her in study hall and helped her figure out her math problems and showed her the different steps to complete it… she got to the point of it, so she wasn't just trying to throw something onto a piece of paper and get a bad grade. I wanted her to understand it for the Regents.*

As these examples demonstrate, schoolwide mentoring programs helped facilitate positive peer relationships and encouraged youth to serve as models for younger students and peers to emulate (Bandura, 1986). In several cases, the effects of these programs were apparent in the classroom peer ecology (Rodkin & Ryan, 2012) where students described spontaneously assisting one another with projects and assignments.

Connecting to the Community with Extracurriculars

Lastly, extracurricular programs at Crown Point served the function of improving peer relationships by introducing youth to peers they may not have otherwise had contact with while also making connections between the school and the wider community. Such findings again illustrate the interaction between various ecological systems which come to bear on relationships among youth.

Educators at Crown Point described leveraging local resources to provide enrichment opportunities for students in their rural locations where resources can sometimes be strained. As a school leader commented, "This school goes out of its way to give kids opportunities that large schools don't have." Students at Crown Point were also offered a variety of courses including technical and vocational programming for students who sought to join the workforce after high school. The diverse offerings and extracurriculars helped to strengthen and diversify peer relationships while also reinforcing students' attachments to the surrounding area. As one teacher explained, "I think our school is the heart of our community."

Extracurricular offerings encouraged students to interact with others whom they might not have otherwise interacted. At Crown Point, several students explained how joining team sports both expanded their peer groups while also providing additional leadership opportunities. Alex explained how her Cheerleading coach helped her broaden her circle of friends to include new peers she had not been close with previously:

> *But [teacher name], again, has brought me out of my comfort zone in a way that's made me more confident. I've made more friends. I talk to everyone, and I'm friends with everyone, but I didn't think that before I joined Cheer that I would be friends with the people I'm friends with today – like close friends. In a way it's brought me closer and kind of more observant of who else is in the school.*

Crown Point students described other programs which fostered deeper connections to the wider community. Programs such as "Reconnecting Youth" were described as a useful space where youth from different schools in the region can come together to tackle problems challenging young people. Lucas explained that he participated in this program and reported its benefits to others:

> *We did projects that were beneficial. I was able to bring some stuff back*
> *and ideas. They taught you what to do if your friends or you knew someone*
> *that was thinking about suicide and how you could help them.*

Mackenzie described how her involvement in Reconnecting Youth came with the expectation of her teachers that members act as "role models" for their peers. As she explained, these clubs and organizations also fostered in her a sense of community service:

> *What we do is raise money and we go Christmas shopping for people in the*
> *town that can't really, whose families can't really afford stuff. I love doing*
> *that because… my family at times we didn't have as much, so I kind of know*
> *first-hand how it can be. And I want to help other people with that situation.*

Like MacKenzie and Lucas, Cristy's sense of community attachment was strengthened through school-based activities and programs such as a charity run for cancer survivors as well as organizing a food drive for patients at a nearby clinic which were part of her responsibilities for membership in the National Honor Society. In addition, Cristy's guidance counselor urged her to take a "service credit" rather than a study hall for one period a day. During this time, Cristy spent time working on literacy with the kindergarten students in the other wing of the school:

> *I love going down there because the kids love seeing me…I have a group*
> *of kids that I bring out of the room and we work on letter identification,*
> *and letter sounds, and I've done that since I've been in high school,*
> *working down in the kindergarten room. I really enjoy it.*

The data above provide evidence that extracurricular programs at Crown Point helped connect youth to peers with whom they may not have otherwise interacted. These programs helped disrupt peer cliques while strengthening students" connections between school and community further demonstrating the ways in which various ecological systems can impact peer relationships.

Malverne Senior High School

Malverne Senior High is situated about thirty miles from New York City in a working-class community dotted with small businesses, private homes, and housing complexes. Home to just over 8,500 people, Malverne can be described as a micropolitan locale with high levels of diversity. As the following sections demonstrate, schoolwide practices and programs served to facilitate positive relationships between peers, and these impacts were often reinforced in classroom settings. Lastly, extracurriculars served to break up peer groupings and foster connections between students which transcended the boundaries that, at times, separated them in the wider community. Though in a different context than Crown Point, these findings support an ecologically-oriented view of peer relationships which can account for the interaction of these various subsystems.

Emphasizing Collegiality and Egalitarian Relationships

Like Crown Point participants, educators and students at Malverne described the collaborative and collegial relationships that existed across the school. As one teacher explained: "We collaborate even when we shouldn't be collaborating. When we're eating sandwiches, we're collaborating. We're like, 'What are you doing? What do you need? The kids can't do this. Have

you tried this? What about this?'" The principal at Malverne reiterated a similar message, explaining how his door was "always open" to teachers and parents alike. Like educators at Crown Point, a teacher at Malverne highlighted the connection between adults caring for and collaborating with each other and relationships with and among Malverne High's students: "I think that if the kids see that we like working here, then that's what's going to promote them wanting to be here." In Malverne's response to the school climate survey, 100 percent of staff reported "feeling accepted and respected by most staff members and working together to ensure the needs of students are met" and 98 percent of staff agreed "that they can talk with their principal when they are concerned about a student."

Malverne students described a similar feeling about their school culture and elaborated on the ways in which a "close-knit" school fostered connection between teachers and students and among peers. As Elizabeth, a senior explained:

> *Malverne is a small school, especially if you're here for four years, you basically know a lot of people here and you have connections… Everyone is like supportive of each other. I mean, once you know everyone here, it's like they're kind of just your family.*

Like their counterparts in Crown Point, students at Malverne felt that the caring climate manifested itself in a lack of hierarchy among peer groups and relative absence of bullying. Sean, a senior at Malverne, said in an interview that "this school really doesn't have bullying," Another senior named Nick described what it was like to transfer to Malverne as a freshman:

> *[W]hen I first got to this school I was worried… because I'm more of a shy person. I wasn't sure of how I was going to make friends. But when I was there one person just walked up and was like, "Hey, what's your name? Oh, you want to be friends?" I was like, "Wow. That was easy!"*

In a focus group with two other peers, Robyn, a senior, echoed these sentiments regarding the school climate at Malverne: "We don't have this popular hierarchy, like social hierarchy here. There aren't cliques; you just hang out with this group of people, and sometimes you hang out with this person, and maybe you're friends and maybe you're not." In what follows, we provide further evidence of how positive peer relationships at Malverne were built and strengthened through a number of practices and programs that connected various systems in students' lives.

Providing Leadership Opportunities for Students

Though in a different context than Crown Point, educators at Malverne also endeavored to provide leadership and mentoring opportunities for students. For instance, the superintendent noted how the improvement in performance outcomes coincided with a change in mindset towards student social-emotional learning and discipline. This "critical" change – as he put it – related to a shift in "the standard at which they [students] measure themselves." For instance, in noting a previously high level of school suspensions, Malverne educators began to utilize restorative justice practices as well as peer mentoring to help foster positive relationships between students. One such example is the "Growing into Responsible Leaders" (GIRLs) club which paired upper-grade girls with younger peers. Although the program was first, as one school leader put it, like "pulling teeth," kids eventually started to "love it." As he continued, "the following year they came back again, and now they'd love for it to be more like a club where they can go out and do more activities."

Malverne youth described how they were encouraged by educators to take on roles as leaders in their school. Several students, for instance, brought up examples of student-led initiatives in school such as a walkout that was planned in response to the school shootings in Parkland, Florida. School and district leaders, wanting to ensure the walkout could be done safely, met with students to create a plan on which they could all agree. "We sat in the conference room [and] talked about what we wanted to do, how we wanted to do it," explained Erin, a senior. This planning eventually developed into an event where the entire student body walked to the field behind the school and organized themselves into a human peace sign in honor of the victims of the shooting. "That was really nice that they were able to listen to us," she said.

Like in Crown Point, schoolwide initiatives and programs – meso-level forces – came to bear on the classroom peer ecology. In classes, for instance, Malverne students described how they were urged to lead discussions about difficult and sensitive issues ranging from sexual assault to mental health. Being treated like "adults" – as Robyn explained – made her not only feel more comfortable and open with teachers but also well prepared to engage in dialogue with those who don't share the same views. As Elena, a junior, said, "I voice my opinions a lot." And Sean described the value of having "heated" political discussions between students in Government class:

> *But it always ends the same way in that at the end of class, everyone is still . . . somehow it all dials back down, and everyone just goes back to being normal because having this opportunity to voice our opinions and not be afraid of that is – we learn to respect each other's way, and I wish more people did that.*

Malverne students also explained how educators encouraged them to work together frequently on projects, form study groups, and assist one another in both formal and informal capacities. A junior named Olivia commented on advice that the Malverne principal had given her regarding studying with others and tutoring her:

> *When you're alone and when you're studying – especially for hard topics like Physics or topics that I'm not good at like Science and stuff, I just feel like it's better to be with somebody, especially somebody that's better at that subject because they can basically tutor you and stuff.*

Clubs, activities, and sports (discussed further below) also provided students with opportunities to become leaders and mentors to their younger peers. As Tina explained, taking on mentoring roles for younger kids as they progress through high school is the norm at Malverne. In particular, she explained how becoming section leader in Band provided her with a valuable opportunity to mentor her younger peers:

> *I always looked up to my section leaders from like 9th to 11th grade. And they always seemed so much older than me and they had so much experience. And when I got to 12th grade I was like, "Oh that's my role now."*

The preceding data illustrated how youth at Malverne have urged to take on roles as leaders, tutors, and mentors with their peers. Notably, these positions were adopted by students at both the school and classroom levels further showing the interaction between various ecological systems.

Enhancing the School Community through Extracurriculars

Like at Crown Point, extracurriculars at Malverne served the dual functions of establishing relationships between youth who might have not interacted in classes while connecting students to the wider community in varied ways. Malverne staff described how they sought to create a range of extracurricular opportunities for students based on their interests and experiences. "What we did, in combination to that [raising academic expectations], was to start to create a lot of clubs and activities that were interest-related to children, at all schools," said the superintendent. Teachers at Malverne recognized the importance of these activities and their popularity across student groupings. As one educator put it:

> *I think a lot of the kids are getting involved with the sports, they're getting involved with the clubs. We're starting to see more school spirit throughout the years in terms of what the kids want to do, and how they want to promote the school themselves.*

In addition, new programs made college-level courses available to students who had not been permitted but wanted to take those courses in the past. The principal of Malverne explained the importance of eliminating tracking systems to create opportunities for all students:

> *We are breaking that and putting kids into these [AP] classes. One thing I will not accept, and everybody knows it: I want all kids to have the opportunity to take honors courses. I don't ever want to hear what kids can't do.*

Like their counterparts in Crown Point, Malverne youth reiterated the importance of extracurriculars and felt these activities provided unique spaces to develop relationships with peers with whom they may not have otherwise had a chance to interact. These new relationships helped to break down barriers across student groups and forge a more harmonious school environment. As Olivia explained, "It doesn't matter if you're in the band or on the football team. Nobody cares, we're all the same… because the music kids are the athletes, because there are football people and volleyball people in the band." Similarly, a senior named Mary described how the relationships she developed by participating in the school's choir opened her eyes up to the mutual challenges that she and her peers endured:

> *I feel like there are a lot of kids, especially in this generation, who feel the same way. I actually have a friend who feels the same way that I'm trying to help. I feel like everybody just needs help. That's what I've learned from those three [extracurricular] activities because I'm with a group of people who feel the same way I feel.*

During a Malverne focus group Steven, a senior, explained how extracurricular activities helped create unity among their peers and allowed them to build relationships with people they might not have otherwise had a chance to get to know:

> *When students join Robotics, most of them don't know anything about it. And they come there and they learn. And everybody learns the same thing and everybody ends up learning at the same rate. So, in a way, it kind of*

humanizes everybody. You don't see the kid at the top of the class as that really smart kid that's better than everyone else. You see him as the kid that doesn't know how to tighten a screw. It almost gives us all a new perspective on each other.

Malverne students also reflected on the importance of the school as a site where the youth of different backgrounds from the town can learn from one another, an opportunity that was not always available in the wider community context. Elizabeth, a senior, summed up how going to Malverne prepared her for "the real world" and Robyn reiterated Elizabeth's message and highlighted the value that a diverse peer group provided:

I feel like I'm pretty prepared because, with the opportunities that I had at school, I'm more open to just embracing other people and just talking to them. And I feel like just being like within this school and knowing everybody here, I feel like that is a beneficial thing. (Elizabeth)

Going to this school, I know so much about people of different races, religions, and backgrounds than someone else would. So, I think that it causes me to be maybe a more empathetic person, or maybe a more culturally understanding person than another person would be. (Robyn)

As shown in these examples, the variety of programs and extracurricular opportunities served to facilitate positive peer relationships with a range of peers while also strengthening ties to the school and wider community.

Discussion and Conclusion

Previous scholarship has identified important factors that can influence peer relationships at the classroom level (Gest & Rodkin, 2011; Melton et al., 2021; Rodkin & Ryan, 2012), while others have noted how school-level characteristics and practices can impact the interactions among young people (Donohue et al., 2003; Juvonen, 2018; Wentzel, 2017). Little scholarship, however, has addressed the connections between these school systems as well as to the wider community (Crosnoe & Needham, 2004; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Moreover, few studies have offered a qualitative analysis of peer relationships in varied settings featuring the voices of both educators and students. To address this gap, this study drew on data gathered among educators and students from two secondary schools in New York State and utilized an ecological framework to better understand the various influences on peer relationships.

These findings offer practical implications for both educators and policymakers seeking to improve peer relationships across varied school contexts. For one, our findings reveal how peer relationships develop within a wider ecology in which youth live and participate (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). From an ecological view, these wider systems not only come to bear on the lives of youth but also dynamically interact as they learn to engage with others. As shown in this study, these nested contexts came to bear on the relationships that young people developed with one another. For instance, the collaborative and collegial school climate described by participants in both sites was supported through programs and initiatives which sought to promote mentoring and leadership among youth. Notably, these programs had effects not only in school settings but also in the classroom microsystem where students explained how they informally tutored classmates, led projects, and openly exchanged ideas with one another in discussions.

Second, findings show that formal and informal peer mentoring and leadership opportunities can have crucial impacts on peer relationships in school settings (Weissberg et al., 2015). Mentoring programs at Crown Point, for instance, encouraged youth to model positive and prosocial behaviors for their peers and younger students, while in Malverne, educators provided youth with varied spaces to take leadership roles (Eccles et al., 1993). Through these opportunities, students learned what their school leaders, teachers, and other adults expected them to do in guiding their peers. These instances of modelling were further reinforced by the collegial relationships among staff, which as educators at both schools noted, served as useful models for students to emulate in their own peer relationships (Bandura, 1986).

Lastly, these findings further illustrate the importance of creating heterogeneous student groupings across school settings. To break down barriers between peer groups, educators in these schools reduced the rigidity of academic tracking systems and set high standards for all students (Wilcox et al., 2018), approaches which are crucial not only in reducing inequities of opportunity to engage in rigorous coursework but also because they foster an inclusive environment in which students with diverse talents and backgrounds can develop a sense of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Oakes, 2005). The variety of extracurricular opportunities offered to students was another way in which educators were able to disrupt the formation of cliques and ensure students interacted with a wide range of their peers (Brown & Evans, 2002; Juvonen, 2018; Wentzel, 2017). In both settings, these programs were connected to the wider community; for Crown Point students, it served as a way to give back to the town, while in Malverne, the school provided a valuable space for students to interact with diverse groups of peers not always available to them in other contexts.

While it is notable that educators in these two contexts were able to use similar strategies effectively to foster positive peer relationships despite serving different populations, these two case studies are not meant to represent all secondary schools. As with any qualitative study, generalizations beyond these data must be made with care as each school setting has unique qualities where some approaches to cultivating positive peer relationships may work better than others. Indeed, further research can draw on the findings presented here to improve the understanding of how educators may foster positive peer relationships in varied contexts. Additional work can build on the ecological framework presented here by taking into account the interactions of various systems that impact the relationships among young adults.

The past several years of the COVID-19 pandemic deeply transformed the relationships between peers and the classrooms, schools, and communities in which these relationships develop (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). School closures deprived young people of various events, ceremonies, and rites tttt have the potential to create solidarity across peer groups and build a stronger sense of school belonging (Plachta & Hagan, 2020). In addition, the shift to remote learning hampered the capacity of students to interact and develop meaningful relationships with one another in classroom settings and through extracurricular activities (Fay et al., 2020). Researchers are only beginning to understand the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic on students' social-emotional well-being (National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine, 2021). While many steps must be taken by educators to help undo the damage over the course of the pandemic, developing and facilitating positive relationships among peers will be a crucial component of the post-pandemic recovery. It is our hope that this article provides practical insight into how educators might accomplish this task.

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Appendix A

Sample of interview and focus group questions

Example 1: Mainstream teacher interview

1. If someone from another school asked you to describe this school, what would you say? In terms of:
   a. what is valued
   b. the students
   c. their families/caregivers
   d. the community
   e. staff – their competencies, beliefs, behaviors
   f. climate in the school.
2. How would you describe high-quality teaching?
   a. What types of support are you offered in providing such high-quality teaching? Who provides that support?
   b. What kinds of things do you do to specifically engage students challenged by poverty or students of different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds?
   c. What do you do to re-engage disengaged students?
   d. How do you identify those students?
3. How do you define success?
   a. What kinds of things have helped you and others you work with in achieving success? Please provide an example.
   b. What kinds of things have hindered you and others you work with in achieving success? Please provide an example.
4. How do you collaborate with other teachers or support staff?
   a. Do these collaborations extend to other schools (e.g., the elementary and middle school)? Please describe.
   b. How do you assess the value of those collaborations in your work?
   c. Does any of this collaboration extend to other schools in the district? If so, who is involved?
   d. What is the focus of this collaboration?
   e. How is collaboration supported and sustained? By whom?
   f. What outcomes do you achieve from these collaborations?
   g. Do you evaluate the effectiveness of these collaborations? Describe.

Example 2: Student focus group

1. How would you describe this school to a new student? Please write one or two words on a post-it note that describes this school and place it in the center of the table. Please tell me about these words. What made you think of them?
   a. What kinds of things stand out to you about the teachers and other adults who work here?
   b. What stands out to you about the kinds of things like different academic programs/classes, sports, clubs, etc. offered to you here?
   c. What stands out to you as the biggest priorities or most important things in this school?

       d. Anything else stand out to you?

2. If there were a thing you could change in this school, what would it be?

       a. Please describe any opportunities you or others have had to make changes or work with the principal(s), teachers and other adults in the school to make changes? Please describe.

3. What would you say your teachers and other adults in this school expect of you?

       a. Please share an example when those expectations were made clear to you.

       b. Who communicated those expectations and how?

       c. In what ways are expectations of you different or the same as for others? Please provide an example.

Appendix B

Codebook excerpts and samples of coded text

Codebook excerpt for Phase I (Educator study)

Collaboration

collab-teachers	collaboration among teachers; teacher leadership; planning time
collab – school	collaboration at the school level
collab – district	collaboration at the district level
collab – students	collaboration among students

Context

community	social/historical information about community; ways of informing the community and community informing school; collaborative initiatives with community orgs, colleges, etc.
students	student population change over time: general characteristics of student population
parents and family members	parent context; degree and qualities of parental involvement; efforts to connect with parents

Curriculum

curr-content	content of the curriculum
curr-process	process of developing and revising/aligning curriculum; who is involved
extracurricular	extracurricular offerings; clubs, sports; service in community

Perspective, goals, beliefs

pers-goals	process of setting district and school level goals and priorities; who is involved; what is included in those goals
pers-climate	perspectives on climate of school and or district; feelings people hold about the school
pers-challenges	perspectives on challenges and how to overcome them

Relationships

rel-parents	relationships with parents; how are they nurtured or not
rel-students:	relationships with students; how to develop them; examples

Codebook excerpt for Phase II (Student Study)

Important spaces

elementary-middle classrooms	elementary or middle school classrooms as frequented spaces
math classroom	math classroom as frequented space
science or science lab	science classroom or science lab as frequented space
community establishments	places students go including cafes, restaurants, local establishments open to the public
parks	important spaces including parks, recreational areas in the community

Relationships

rel-community members	community member involvement in the school
rel-teachers	relationships with teachers, academic/social-emotional support
rel-counselor	relationships with guidance counselor
rel-family members	relationships with parents and family members
rel-peers	important or regular peer relationships
rel-leaders	relationships that students have with school and district leaders

Instructional program and curriculum

relevance	relevance that school experiences have to students' lives; examples of application
extracurriculars	activities, clubs, sports students are involved in; importance placed on them
leadership	opportunities for student leadership
student agency	opportunities for student agency; examples
SEL	prioritization of social-emotional learning; examples

Interview Example 1: Tina, Malverne High School Senior

Interviewer: *Can you tell me a little bit about how you felt taking that role [as band section leader] or anything you took away from it in terms of learning?*

Student: In 12th grade, well I play flute, and I was the section leader of the flute section this year (**extracurriculars**). I was in charge of making sure everyone memorized their music, they always had their stuff for competitions, and they never forgot their flute at the school or something like that (**leadership**)… I always looked up to my section leaders from like 9th to 11th grade. And they always seemed so much older than me and they had so much experience. And when I got to 12th grade I was like, "Oh that's my role now" (**rel-peers).**

Interview Example 2: Crown Point Principal
Interviewer*: How do you define success?*

Principal: Success is gained through cooperation (**collab-school**). Without us having that basis of everyone having the same vision, it would not be attainable (**pers-goals**). We have group meetings on certain kids that we may see falling off the radar that we know we can help. We have constant communication with parents (**rel-parents**). We can only do this because we have a great working relationship. Our focus, our vision, is that we want students to be successful (**collab-school**).