

Case Study of Practice

“What’s in it for me?” - an investigation into the motivations, challenges and benefits of peer leadership in a School of Education.

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Abstract

This case study of practice provides an account of an academic peer-learning scheme in a university School of Education in the South of England. The significance of this case study is to provide insights specifically into the experiences of undergraduate peer leaders. The scheme is called PASS (Peer Assisted Study Sessions), and is a nationally recognised student-led mentoring scheme involving trained student volunteers from levels five and six (second and third year) facilitating weekly study sessions for level four (first year) students. Through the voices of seven student PASS leaders, this small-scale study employed a qualitative approach using a focus group to explore leaders’ motivations, and to enable a discussion of the benefits and challenges they experience through leadership. The findings also reveal the leaders’ awareness of their growing confidence, communication and employability skills development, particularly pertinent for Education students in relation to their future career paths in teaching and learning settings.

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Introduction

PASS, also known as peer assisted learning or 'PAL', and supplemental instruction 'SI' in the United States, runs across 29 countries, in more than 1500 institutions worldwide. PASS is a student-led initiative where issues relating to course material and student life can be discussed in a friendly, informal environment with peers and trained student facilitators. The sessions can also include supporting the first years in their transition to university life. PASS leaders do not tend to give any answers to academic questions or coursework nor take the place of a lecturer. Instead PASS provides an opportunity for students to make new friends and to study with in small groups of approximately 10-15 students and two allocated student leaders. In other university evaluations of respective PASS schemes, regular attendees of PASS have shown better knowledge and understanding of course material suggesting a positive relationship between students' regular participation in PASS and academic outcome, compared with students who never participate or do not participate regularly (Chilvers and McConnell, 2014; Fostier and Carey, 2007; Coe, et al, 1999; Scriver, et al, 2015).

In this study we are particularly interested in the leaders' experiences, both from the perspective of the influencing factors of taking up a leadership position, as well as their future aspirations and career goals. This case study is an account of practice rather than a traditional research enquiry; underpinning theories of motivation however are of relevance. The 'orientation' or locus of motivation, concerning the underlying attitudes and goals that give rise to action (Ryan and Deci, 2000), in this example, look at intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. In parallel, the experiential issues that leaders discuss such as the interactions with first year students, or the perceived value (or not) that first years exhibit towards the PASS sessions also appear to reveal an impact on leaders' motivation and self-efficacy, concerned with people's beliefs in their ability to influence events that affect their lives (Bandura, 1997). Finally, the practical challenges, or 'hygiene factors' found in Hertzberg's two-factor theory of motivation-hygiene (Miner, 2005) that occurred for leaders and which they had to confront, appear also to exert pressure on leader motivation and satisfaction. Offering a reflective opportunity for leaders to share their experiences with one another enables them to tease out the skills and resilience they have developed to take forward into new contexts beyond the university setting.

Context and background

At the University of Brighton, PASS is coordinated centrally across the institution by the Centre for Learning and Teaching. This involves the design and delivery of PASS leader training, providing leaders with resources and equipment, and bringing together a network of discipline-based PASS supervisors. As Brighton is a multi-campus university with five separate sites spread across the three locations of Brighton, Eastbourne and Hastings, it is vital that PASS is owned within disciplinary areas to ensure the operational elements such as timetabling, room allocation, and supervision of leaders is located in the most appropriate spaces to optimise potential student engagement. It is made clear to academic staff and supervisors that PASS is a student-led initiative, and that the leaders and attendees should be setting their own agenda for sessions. As a two-way process, the attendees and leaders provide teaching teams with real-time feedback about the first year students' learning and experience on the module or course of focus within PASS.

In the School of Education, PASS began in 2012/13 with 14 leaders across the BA(Hons) Education course and one module of the BA(Hons) Primary Education with QTS course, with about 60 participants. The success of PASS in this initial year in terms of student attendance and satisfaction led to the expansion of the scheme and from 2013/14 to date, PASS runs for all first years across semester one on both courses, involving 30 leaders offering PASS to 200 students.

Methodology

This qualitative case study aims to present the participants' stories of PASS leadership in the context of studying in the field of Education that has been outlined. Through the use of a small structured focus group led by the Education PASS Supervisor, and a member of the Centre for Learning and Teaching, the participants explored specified topics and offered their individual views and experiences through group interaction. We sought the leaders' permissions to record, transcribe and use the data and themes derived from their contributions. First-tier ethical approval was obtained to meet the institutional regulations for internal evaluation and research. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of participants.

The PASS leaders were invited to attend the focus group and seven out of a possible 21 volunteered to participate. Recruitment of participants was difficult as the Education students frequently undertake placements away from the university. Of the participant group, all were female, involving both young and mature students.

At the beginning of the focus group the participants were provided with a prompt sheet to offer a framework for discussion, guided by concepts and theories relating to motivation and self-efficacy.

Semi-structured questions/ prompts:

- *Motivation* – how has your PASS leadership impacted your own levels of motivation towards university?
- *Involvement* – what are your levels of participation in other extra-curricular activities (inside and outside of university)? Did you also participate in activities at school prior to university?
- *Employability* – leading on from the last question, what value do you see activities having on your future/ career? Was that a reason to get involved in the first place?
- *Belonging* – has there been any impact on your university experience, and on your identity as a student? (e.g. engagement with staff, feeling valued, feeling part of a community)
- *First year experience* – as a first year, how would you describe yourself and your feeling of student identity? (such as, struggling, lonely, motivated, engaged) What about your transition from FE to university? Did any of those experiences impact on your decision to become a PASS Leader?
- *Aspirations* – where do you see yourself 5 years after graduating?
- *Leadership* – how might you use some of the skills that you've gained through PASS leading and transfer them into different contexts?
- *Open* – an opportunity for any other comments

Findings

Motivation, demotivation

A significant motivation for School of Education PASS leaders appears to be the opportunity to develop additional skills to take forward into a teaching environment. Attending PASS sessions themselves was identified as useful, and they wanted to ‘give back’ and support others in the way they had been supported in their first year. Another motivation is to reinforce their own learning through revisiting year one course material.

Motivation is, at times, challenged, and they find it frustrating when they have planned sessions which are then poorly attended; an important de-motivating factor that the participants were keen to discuss and rationalise.

Our motivation was quite high after the training days and we had all sorts of plans and things, and when we had one person turn up, or two, you can't do any group activities [...] sometimes our motivation became a bit low there [Lynn]

We heard that people were avoiding it [PASS] because of ‘icebreakers’ [Holly]

One thing we got out of PASS is all saying ‘why didn't we have this last year’ this would have been brilliant, but the first years this year certainly in our group don't seem to have known that [Lynn]

They [first year students] said that they were very much told ‘oh it's optional, it's there if you want it’ rather than ‘please go’ [Lynn]

Involvement and participation

The participants identify the value in volunteering for the PASS scheme, and engagement appears to be of personal significance, with some having been mentors or belonged to a community group during their primary and secondary education. They describe how it has given them the opportunity for experiential learning, alongside others for mutual encouragement.

I like to do extra-curricular activities like been along to [British Sign Language Society] sessions... but I always have done, it's just... who I am [Lucy]

I tend not to be involved and never was at school in any extra-curricular, although outside of school I do help children train with cricket, I am the welfare officer at my local cricket club [...] but that is the first thing I have ever got involved with [Lynn]

See I don't really do anything other in uni, but outside uni I teach an apprenticeship but that's it really [Holly]

When we're not at uni when I'm back at home I volunteer at a special needs school on their summer and Christmas programmes, and then I also did teach Brownies for six years [Jenny]

I do voluntary work at a school as well, but I think mine was more, it was on our timetable, and I did it because my friends were doing it and I didn't want to be left on my own [Sam]

Back home I help run a local Beaver group and teaching skating as well [...] and I used to go and volunteer at the school at the same time. When I'm at uni I help run a kids group at my local church [Janice]

Parental influence appears to be of significance to some students, as well as overcoming personal challenges:

I used to always go to guide[ing] groups from when I was younger, it was something my parents always wanted us to do. I got more passionate about actually helping because the experiences I got from it myself when I was younger and how much that helped me grow and develop, cause I used to hate school, getting bullied and stuff, so like that was somewhere I could be myself, I could be who I wanted to be, and then being able to give those opportunities back to children again is what really inspired me to do it and keep doing it [Janice]

I've always kept myself quite busy really, even in primary school [...] my mum used to encourage me to do extra things [...] generally just to improve myself really. At uni I've been learning French, and a member of the BSL [British Sign Language] committee [Sam]

Employability

Future employability is a factor for the participants, especially as they are aware that on application forms and at interviews for teaching posts they need to have something to talk about which helps them stand out from the crowd. Being a PASS leader provides this opportunity, and they receive a PASS Leader certificate that lists the skills they will have demonstrated to evidence this.

Having additional things on your CV has always, from my parents... it's so good to do anything that will further your CV. [...] my cousin, she employs teachers in Bristol, said that with a supporting reference, this would put them further up the list, so I thought that was a good thing [Jenny]

For Head teachers it would say to them, this is the sort of person that is going to come in and run after school clubs for me, this is going to be someone who is involved in the life of the school [Lynn]

Belonging

The participants report a positive experience in making friends with the first years, and creating course cohesion that hadn't necessarily been promoted before the PASS scheme. Relationships between staff and students are also cited as valuable, helping to break down some of the barriers between students and lecturers.

Building friendships and bonds with first year students, they can come to you, you to them, whereas before we would just stick in our little groups, isolated [Sam]

You remember that you're not just part of year one, year two, but that you are part of the whole university [Lynn]

Before it, [staff member] passed me in the corridor, they wouldn't know who I was, now they do and I speak to them quite regularly, sometimes they email me not just about PASS but about "how's everything going?", this is building bonds that are more than just 'you're a lecturer and you're a student' [Jenny]

I think that for particularly the younger ones they have realised that there isn't quite such a distinction between older adults and... 'you lot' [laughter] [Lynn]

First Year Experience

We had previously noticed that for many PASS leaders, they remember the feeling of being homesick or disorientated when first starting university, so they want to support the new first years through this time and share their own tips and advice in a positive way. This aspect of the focus group generated much discussion and support between the participants as they verbalised their experiences. Having someone to ask questions of, other than staff, helps new students settle in and allows the PASS leaders to feel useful.

For me it was a massive move [coming to university], I am from a very family oriented house, so to come here and move into a house full of strangers it was really difficult I found [...] but to have them few moments [...] and it did feel quite lonely. Most of the people in my group were commuting in, they were still at home so... those who weren't stuck together quite well. When I was thinking about doing PASS I thought 'right, well if anyone is homesick, we've been there we've done that, so we can give them that sort of advice' [Jenny]

Coming in as a mature student, and particularly in our year there aren't many [...] but I was thinking they'd all be thinking 'god look at her' and 'oh she's older than my mum' I thought if there were any other mature students that I could help them, but also that in some ways I could be the mother figure who is not in charge [Lynn]

The first year for me, I was scared a lot of the time, like how do I do this assignment, what am I going to be like on placement, and I just thought well wouldn't it be great if I could have a contact with someone [...] wouldn't it be great if we could do that with the first years this time. We have had questions about finding accommodation for next year, and placements come up quite a lot [Lucy]

I just remember having so many questions and not knowing who to ask them to, I just thought it would be nice for them to have someone to ask those questions to [Holly]

Aspirations

The participants spoke about their career aspirations, and opportunities to specialise in particular subjects or take on additional leadership. What comes across is their willingness to consider a wide range of professional roles within a school.

I'd quite like to be an English coordinator in a school [Lynn]

I'd quite like to be coordinating maths or just doing something extra on top of the teaching job within the school [Holly]

I want to work with SEN children, I would prefer that to be in an SEN school because that is where a lot of my experience is from [...] or having that bit more responsibility [Jenny]

I would like to be a maths coordinator within a school but more keyed at early years [Janice]

Leadership

A key skill reported by the participants is improved leadership ability, together with organisation, communication and self-management skills. This gives them increased confidence in their own abilities related to future employability. Through being PASS leaders they feel they have become better at planning and differentiation, which is helping them to progress through their course and be better prepared for the demands of teaching in the future.

It has changed some of the ways I approach teaching, especially in the areas I do RE [religious education] as a subject specialism, and instead of teaching them I'm almost eliciting their ideas through facilitation [Jenny]

I would say reflection as well [...] You get to develop your ideas a bit more when you reflect and doing the PASS module critical incident report has really picked apart how to reflect and why its useful [Lucy]

I think it is good because you didn't know how many people were going to turn up so you had to kind of adapt on the day, it makes you a bit more confident about straying from the plan a bit more, whereas teaching last year I was so worried as soon as something went wrong I don't know what to do, whereas now I think we can handle it a little bit more [Sam]

I think working with people nearer to your own age [...] they are more likely if you mess up to pull you up on it, whereas a with a child they wouldn't understand if you've done something wrong so I think it definitely makes you have to be strong in your judgement [Jenny]

Discussion

The aim of this investigation was to focus upon the motivations, challenges and benefits of peer leadership in the context of PASS in the School of Education. This discussion will address each of these three themes in turn, returning to some of the motivational literature that helps to position the findings within a theoretical framework.

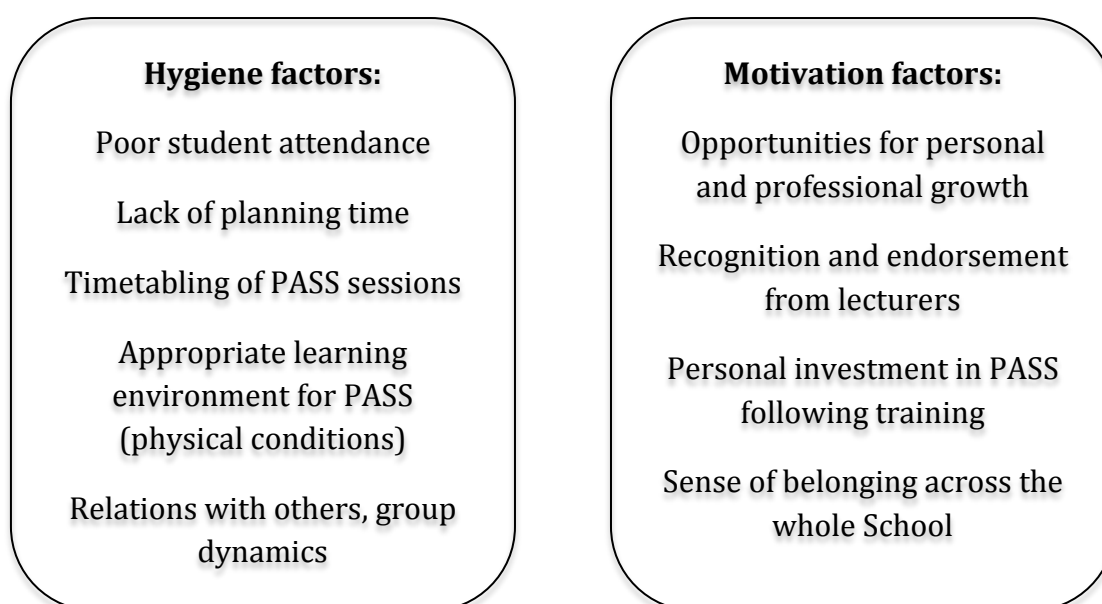
(1) Motivation

The participants identified several key reasons that might have an effect on their motivation, some intrinsic– such as their personality, positive volunteering experiences

or personal reward from their involvement in extra-curricular activities, ‘giving back’ having received encouragement from others. Other extrinsic reasons are expressed – such as improving their CV and job possibilities, parental or teacher endorsement, gaining reward for taking on additional responsibilities. Whether intrinsic or extrinsic, Ryan and Deci (2000) assert that both of these motivational orientations have the power to self-endorse and propel a person into action. We were interested to find out if there are influencing factors that might make a student more likely to volunteer for a PASS leadership position. Of the seven participants, five indicated parental support and endorsement across the themes of involvement, employability, and aspirations. The issue of motivation is further discussed in the following sub-sections which look specifically at challenges and benefits of PASS leadership.

(2) Challenges

The challenges that the participants described, such as lack of time, coping with poor attendance, or dealing with students who don’t really want to attend, could be connected with Herzberg’s hypothesis of the factors associated with satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work. Although this theoretical framework is allied to organisation and management theory, the concepts of motivation-hygiene have been applied here in the context of mentoring addressing the role of student leadership within a university setting. The diagram below labels the motivation and hygiene factors found to effect leaders in this case study.



Dissatisfaction

Satisfaction

(Based on Herzberg's two-factor theory of motivational hygiene (Miner, 2005))

The issue of unpredictable student attendance significantly affected the participants in this study, with all seven discussing the negative effects on their motivation. As PASS is a voluntary scheme and first year students were encouraged but not required to attend, planning and facilitating sessions was more challenging for these leaders. Upon reflection, the participants identified the learning opportunities and professional skills gained from this situation, needing to be flexible and adapt their plans at short notice. This situation gave rise to another frustration, when the PASS attendees were not being proactive in suggesting content for future sessions. Rather than be too directive the participant leaders wanted the attendees to suggest topics to focus on for the next session. However, attending students sometimes didn't know what they wanted to cover, especially early in the first term as they 'don't yet know what they don't know'. This relates to Howell's (1982) notion of unconscious incompetence. This situation was at odds with the leader training that participants had experienced, as they were trained to include students in planning sessions that specifically meet the students' needs.

Problematic timetabling presents another challenge, along with booking suitable rooms for PASS at times that met the needs of the students and leaders. For one cohort, PASS is timetabled between a taught module session involving one hour of module content followed by an hour of PASS followed by one hour of module content, and that tends to ensure better attendance. However, this also presents a problem if attendees feel they have to be there if they don't really want to be. For another cohort, PASS follows a taught session, but some students choose to go home, or have other commitments, rather than stay on to attend PASS. Some leaders choose to change the times to suit themselves and the group and book a study room each week within the campus library.

Participants encountered a dilemma in not answering some questions put to them by the first years. Although leaders and staff make it clear to students that PASS leaders are not 'teachers,' there is often a student expectation that they will re-teach module content or answer questions that the leaders feel unable to answer. This leads to

frustrations on the part of the students, and tests the facilitation skills of the leaders. Some experience over domination by one or two students in the group who try to influence the content to suit their own needs rather than the needs of the whole group. This tests leaders' ability to manage PASS sessions and be mindful of group dynamics.

Participants suggest that the leaders work well with their paired partners, especially when they are able to self-select their co-leader. There were a small number of challenging instances described, such as one leader over dominating the planning process and PASS session, or conversely a leader who takes a back seat, which leads to some frustrations. De-brief sessions and meetings with the PASS supervisor help the leaders to reflect and in some way resolve issues effectively.

A final point to be drawn from the data is that some participants feel they do not have enough contact with module tutors. Although the leaders engage with the PASS supervisor on a regular basis, there also is a named academic lead tutor who is familiar with the module and specific course content. Participants expressed that they do not always receive timely or appropriate support from academic staff and feel that the staff do not always have enough knowledge of the aims and processes of PASS.

(3) Benefits

The participants communicated several areas of benefit to their personal and professional development, which are likely to contribute to both their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation towards leadership. Ryan and Deci (2000) have identified that a variety of scholarly literature on motivation that indicates three psychological 'needs' that we feel are relevant in the context of PASS leading: self-determination, competence, and interpersonal relatedness.

The participant leaders feel they gain more confidence when presenting in front of their peers, and that their peers can be the toughest and most honest critics. If they got positive feedback from their co-leader and the PASS attendees, several participants sense this is a sound indication that they have delivered a successful session. Similarly, if their peers give them constructive criticism this is taken on board and they strive to make changes to improve their practice. Ashwin (2003) places importance on student to student interactions to enhance learning and suggests that being a leader can change

students' views on social learning, challenging the more traditional model of self-learning.

Additional practice in planning sessions is viewed as beneficial for leaders in readiness for work placement. Effective lesson planning is key to being successful in the school classroom, and the participants appreciate and benefit from the extra practice in this skill that they acquire through PASS. It seems they particularly gain from developing an ability to plan for the diversity in learning styles, discussed also by Lochie and Van Lanen (2008) which contributes to their understanding of course material and improved self-confidence as a learner.

The participants describe becoming more resourceful and flexible, 'thinking on their feet' when it comes to planning and delivering sessions. Commonly the leaders described planning a session for six to eight students but only two might attend. This leads them to develop skills in changing their plans at the last minute and still be able to facilitate a useful session. Thinking in advance about how to alter an activity designed for a group of six, but running it for a group of three, proves an invaluable outcome of being a PASS leader, in preparation for a teaching career.

Leaders are required to write an evaluation of their sessions and many report that this process helps them to reflect on what has worked well, or not, and why. This leads them to develop skills in self-evaluation, critical awareness, and planning beyond some of the usual requirements of undergraduate study. Malm et al (2012) have written about leaders developing a deeper understanding of course content and improved subject knowledge as a result of this enhanced reflection.

Working with the frustrations of students not turning up or changing their minds about the content they want, appears to have helped these leaders develop their ability to be patient and empathic. This skill is developed over time and two participants commented on how their approach and feelings towards others changes throughout the period of running PASS. Couchman (2009) talks about leaders' self-reflections finding empathy with other students. This is a key skill for student teachers as they prepare for their first teaching jobs, along with self-management and organisation. Some participants feel this is an area that has let them down in past work placement or assignments and they value the opportunity to enhance these skills. Although, planning

and running PASS encroaches on their time, these leaders recognise the improvement of their time management and that PASS leadership provides practical opportunities to refine these skills for the future.

Occasionally the participants alluded to the lack of enthusiasm by the students attending PASS, however, over time they developed the skills to motivate and engage students to actively participate in the sessions. Among these leaders there is recognition that students have the right not to attend (as PASS is a voluntary scheme) but leaders report that some students have returned, or begun attending, when hearing others talk enthusiastically about PASS sessions.

The increased confidence that these leaders experience became apparent during the focus group. With particular regard to putting forward their own understanding of educational issues, and facilitating others to further their comprehension of the issues, they described making resources, reading suggestions, talking about study skills ideas, and promoting discussion around topics. Malm et al (2012) have written about the impact of PASS leadership on developing a deeper understanding of course content, improved subject knowledge and confidence in talking in front of others. The participants' comments in this case study also support these views.

A key skill to develop in preparation for teaching is communication and presentation, and the participants discussed having more confidence in their ability to communicate with peers, co-leaders, and academic staff. Lockie and Van Lanen (2008) also found that being a PASS leader improved relationships with faculty and other cohort groups. Stout and Daniel, 2006; Donelan, 1999; Coe et al, 1999 cite improved presentation and communication skills as a significant benefit of PASS leadership. The participants discussed their ability to cite PASS leadership on their CV and future job applications, and talk about their experiences and learning from PASS at interviews. This could really make a difference in helping them 'stand out from the crowd' and offer something that other candidates may not have, enhancing their own employability skills and future prospects. This was a key motivational factor for these leaders, especially as most planned to pursue a teaching career. Congos and Stout (2003) report that, beyond graduation, leaders recognise and benefit from improved and sustained communication, interpersonal and leadership skills development.

The following quote offers reflections of how being a leader has particularly helped in the first year of teaching.

Being a PASS leader and ambassador has had a fantastic impact on myself as a learner and teacher and continues to equip me with the skills needed for my role as an NQT. The level of organisation and time management needed to complete my studies and my PASS role has massively helped me in my first year of teaching as I am able to quickly and efficiently complete tasks and prioritise my time. Working with all different types of learners (and people) at University has helped me to form positive working relationships in my teaching role, as it has given me an insight into how to offer support for, and gratefully receive support from, a range of other professionals. As clichéd as it sounds, PASS has given me the confidence in myself and my own skills to tackle my NQT year head on and even offer support for other trainees in my school. PASS has (and will continue to) helped me professionally both through the inter-personal skills I have gained but also through giving me an extra 'edge' and experience which can set you aside from other job candidates and provides a great conversation tool in interviews. [Naomi]

Conclusion

We have presented the results of this investigation into PASS leadership and the associated motivational factors, challenges and benefits, in order to share some of our insights with other practitioners of both peer learning and other student leadership positions. The leaders' narratives indicate strongly that opportunities to enhance their employability are important to their university experience, and to the choices they make in whether to volunteer for extra-curricular activity. Also emergent are the intrinsic factors that may determine whether, or not, students that have been exposed to voluntary or mentoring positions in the past are more likely to become PASS leaders; however this finding cannot be substantiated within the scope of this case study. A further enquiry into motivation with students in non-leader positions would be necessary. These small-scale findings, whilst not generalisable, may indicate that motivational factors whether practical, or self-determined, have an impact on the success of a PASS leader, and subsequently their co-leader and PASS group are affected by their own view of self-efficacy.

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