

2017–2018 Evaluation Report



THE NORA PROJECT

...because everyone has a story.

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“We’re thrilled to see that The Nora Project is impacting student attitudes about disability and improving inclusive cultures in participating classrooms. With this impact data, we look forward to further honing the project with the goal of sparking lasting friendships between students of all abilities.”

– Lauren Schrero, Executive Director



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Nora Project's flagship program is an elementary-school curriculum that pairs children with disabilities ("Nora Friends") with participating classrooms. Students in those classrooms learn all about their Nora Friends through a variety of resources, discussions, interviews, and classroom play dates. They capture photographs and video footage of their Nora Project experiences on iPads and, at the end of the year, they compile what they've captured to create a mini-documentary about each Nora Friend. The documentaries are debuted at a red-carpet film festival celebrating empathy, friendship, and a more inclusive future.

During the 2017-18 school year, an outcome evaluation was conducted on The Nora Project. Three separate measures targeting participating students, teachers and parents of Nora Friends were collected. Using a mixed-methods approach to determine program impact, the evaluation aimed to answer the following questions:

- How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs about people with disabilities changed because of The Nora Project?
- How have these changes influenced student behaviors?
- How have Nora Friends' relationships changed as a result of participating in The Nora Project?
- Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?

Overall, the evaluation findings generated valuable information on promising outcomes for classroom students and Nora Friends. Analyses of student survey data from students showed that:

- Participating students increased their knowledge about living with a disability, empathy, and being a good friend.
- Participating students challenged their assumptions about what it means to be "normal" by interrogating and discussing the topic and by directly interacting with and engaging their Nora Friends in inclusive activities.
- Students realized that they had things in common with their Nora Friends, and as a result were more comfortable approaching other children with disabilities to make friends.



Analyses of teacher survey data revealed:

- Teachers overwhelmingly reported that The Nora Project had an impact on their classroom culture.
- Classrooms that participated in The Nora Project fostered a sense of community, which translated to students being kinder and more caring toward their fellow classmates.
- Teachers reported changes in student behaviors such as students previously monitored for negative behaviors behaving more positively toward their Nora Friends and fellow classmates because of program participation.
- Teachers also reported that since beginning The Nora Project in their classrooms, classroom management became easier. Teachers attributed this improvement to skills students acquired through The Nora Project such as working as a team, problem-solving, adapting and being empathetic not only to Nora Friends, but also to fellow classmates.

Analyses of Nora Friend parent survey data found that:

- Parents of Nora Friends and teachers reported that many Nora Friends who were initially shy or uncomfortable coming to participating classrooms became comfortable, assertive and forged friendships with participating students.
- Parents also reported that their children felt included, welcome, and respected in their assigned classroom.
- Parents described The Nora Project as being a unique opportunity for their children to socialize with typically-developing children, alleviating feelings of isolation.

For more on The Nora Project evaluation, program outcomes, and next steps for program delivery and implementation, please refer to the full report below.



PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Nora Project is an education-based nonprofit founded in 2016. It's flagship program, a yearlong class project, teaches empathy and strengthens inclusive educational environments by encouraging friendships between students and their peers with disabilities. The project centers on a curriculum that is adaptable to almost any teaching schedule and style. It includes a multi-phase implementation structure and sample lesson plans allowing teachers to embed the project into their current units of instruction. The Nora Project trains participating teachers (and other school staff, including counselors and social workers) on the curriculum and encourages educators to use their own creativity to bring the project to life. They provide training, professional development, and program support throughout the school year, as well as all materials, resources, and technology teachers needed to carry out the project from beginning to end.



Participating students at Glen Grove School in Glenview, IL during a Phase 2 activity day visit.

The curriculum centers around three essential questions:

1. What does it mean to be “normal”?
2. What does it mean to be a good friend?
3. Why do we share our stories?

In addition to exploring these questions academically and through classroom discussion, students in participating classrooms have the opportunity to engage their peers with disabilities in fun, inclusive activities and to learn more about them by interviewing their family members, teachers, doctors, therapists, and caretakers. They conclude the project by screening original documentaries they create as a capstone, which share their Nora Friends' stories and lessons learned about friendship. By creating these real-world opportunities in the context of the project's essential questions, The Nora Project normalizes difference, demystifies disability, and encourages meaningful connections between the students and their peers with disabilities.

Over the past two years, The Nora Project has experienced an overwhelming amount of interest from the educational community. Their small group of dedicated staff has worked hard to support that interest by growing the program while maintaining (and improving) its quality. The Next Steps section in this report covers changes to implementation made to support the rapid scaling-up The Nora Project.



EVALUATION DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data, was taken to evaluate The Nora Project on participating students' knowledge, attitude, and behavior change, as well as acquisition of new skills. The evaluation presented here utilized survey data collected from students, teachers and parents of students with disabilities who participated as Nora Friends from August 2017 to June 2018 to inform the outcome evaluation. In order to explore areas of program impact, sustainability, and individual outcomes that the closed-question surveys did not cover, existing and newly created open-ended survey questions were utilized, and a qualitative study was conducted. The mixed-method study aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

1. How have participating students' knowledge, attitudes, and beliefs changed because of their participation in The Nora Project?
2. How have these changes influenced student behaviors?
3. How have Nora Friends' behaviors changed as a result of participating in The Nora Project?
4. Has participation in The Nora Project improved classroom culture and the way students relate to and interact with one another?



Students at Stonegate Elementary in Silver Springs, MD striking a pose at their Nora Night Film Festival.

Evaluation Measures and Program Participants

Three separate measures were utilized to capture program outcomes. The student survey was developed in the summer of 2016 and revised prior to the 2017-18 school year. The Nora Project solicited feedback from outside experts and teachers and changes were made to incorporate a more age-appropriate rating scale. In addition to questions exploring empathy and inclusion of students with disabilities, altruism and safe school environment survey questions were incorporated. Open-ended questions covering the three essential questions that drive instruction were also added, along with questions that explore program impact were also added.

The teacher survey was developed in the summer of 2016. The survey, completed by participating teachers after each phase of the project, explored implementation issues and need for technical assistance and support. Open-ended questions on the program's impact on students were added prior to the 2017-18 school year.

A newly created Nora Friend parent and caretaker survey was implemented in the 2017-18 school year. The survey asked parents and caretakers to rate their children's experience with core program components and explored program impact in open-ended questions. The table below shows the number of respondents for each survey and the data collection timeframe.



Table 1

Survey Name	Respondent Type	Number of Respondents	Data Collection Timeframe
Student Assessment	Typically Developing Students	584 (pre), 595 (post 1), 433 (post 2)	8/17-6/18
Teacher Survey	Teachers Implementing the Program	22	8/17-6/18
Parent/Caretaker Survey	Nora Friend Parents/ Caretakers	30	6/18-7/18

Descriptions of how the survey data were analyzed and findings from the survey data are included in the sections that follow.

Data Analyses

As mentioned above, a mixed-methods approach was employed for this evaluation. Students, teachers, and parents of Nora Friends completed surveys via Google Forms. The evaluation consultant downloaded and cleaned each dataset (i.e. checked for and removed any errors in data entry, such as duplicate responses), and conducted descriptive analyses (e.g. frequencies, percentages, mean responses) of individual survey items pertinent to the evaluation questions.

The Evaluation Consultant developed an iterative process for coding open-ended survey questions from each of the three survey types, which resulted in two cycles of analyses: pattern and conceptual model building. A categorized inventory of the open-ended survey questions' content was conducted and set the groundwork for thematic analysis. Pattern coding was used to organize thematic patterns that describe phenomena in the qualitative data that relate to specific evaluation questions.

Examples of pattern codes are:

- Accepting people for who they are
- Nobody is normal
- Finding common ground with Nora Friends
- Being kind to others

Following pattern coding, the evaluation consultant developed conceptual models by linking themes and emergent codes generated from the first cycle of analysis to create a higher-level understanding about the impact of The Nora Project.



Students using technology to capture a touching moment of friendship and fun!



While 80% of respondents to the Harvard Study were more concerned with their own achievement, 80% of Nora Project participations valued caring for others more.



EVALUATION FINDINGS

Overall, the outcome evaluation findings generated valuable information on promising outcomes for classroom students and Nora Friends. Analyses of survey data from students, teachers, and parents of Nora Friends show that the program provided a welcoming and inclusive environment for Nora Friends to socialize with their classroom friends, while student participants learned what it means to be kind, empathetic, accepting, and good friends. Findings also reveal necessary revisions to the program to provide more inclusion training, resources, and support for teachers to ensure activities are appropriate for children of all abilities, as well as more opportunities for Nora Friends to socialize with participating students outside of school. The sections below cover evaluation findings for each evaluation measure.

Student Survey Data

Quantitative Findings

Participating students were given a survey that measures key project outcomes three times during the school year: (1) At the beginning of the program before any instruction had taken place; (2) Before participating students met their Nora Friends for the first time; and (3) At the end of the program, after students had screened their documentaries about their Nora Friends. The survey data below shows promising signs of program impact on participating students with regards to cultivating and practicing empathy and building inclusive friendships with children with disabilities.

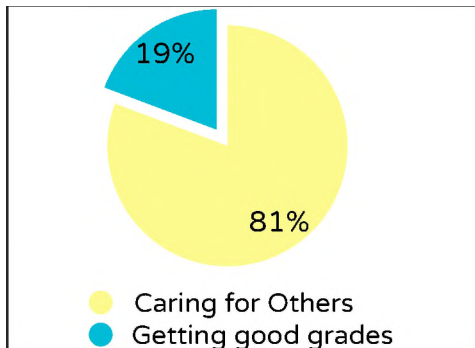
The question represented in Figure 1: "What is more important to you - getting good grades or caring for others?" was added to the final student survey only. This question is a modified, age-appropriate version of a question used in the Making Caring Common project through Harvard University, in which ten thousand middle and high school students were asked a variation of the same question. Only 20% of respondents in the Harvard study chose 'caring for others' when asked what was most important to them, and students who gave caring low priority also tended to score low on a scale for empathy. Research shows that when children and teens rank achievement over caring, they are more likely to develop harmful behavior such as disrespect, dishonesty and bullying.¹ The Making Caring Common study was one of many showing a trend among youth of declining empathy and rising narcissism.² What was particularly remarkable about The Nora Project data on this question, is that it appears to turn the trend on its head. While 80% of respondents to the Harvard Study were more concerned with their own achievement, 80% of Nora Project participations valued caring for others more.

¹ *The Children We Mean to Raise: Making Caring Common Research Report* (2014) Harvard University School of Education. retrieved from <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/files/gse-mcc/files/mcc-research-report.pdf?m=1448057487>.

² See J. Twenge, S. Konrath, J. Foster, W.K. Campbell, and B. Bushman, "Egos Inflating Over Time: A Cross-Temporal Meta-Analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory, 2008," *Journal of Personality* 76, no. 4 (August 2008): 875-901; S. Konrath, "The Empathy Paradox: Increasing Disconnection in the Age of Increasing Connection," in *Handbook of Research on Technoself: Identity in a Technological Society*, Rocci Luppigini, ed. (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2012): 204-28; "Empathy: College Students Don't Have as Much as They Used To, Study Finds," *Science Daily* (May 29, 2010).



Figure 1



An overwhelming majority of TNP students felt that caring for others was most important to them. (n=425)

A major goal of The Nora Project is to forge friendships between typically-developing children and children with disabilities. The graphs below show item-level analyses from the student survey about cognitive empathy (i.e. understanding why people feel the way they feel) and building friendships with students with disabilities. Students were asked to self-report to what extent they agreed with a statement using a Likert scale. Scoring on the scale was as follows: Strongly Agree received 5 points; Agree received 4 points; Neutral/Undecided received 3 points; Disagree received 2 points, and; Strongly Disagree received 1 point. Figures 2 through 6 show student responses to specific questions from The Nora Project survey.

Students reported a slight increase in cognitive empathy when comparing scores prior to the start of the program and the end of the program as demonstrated in Figures 2 and 3.

Figure 2

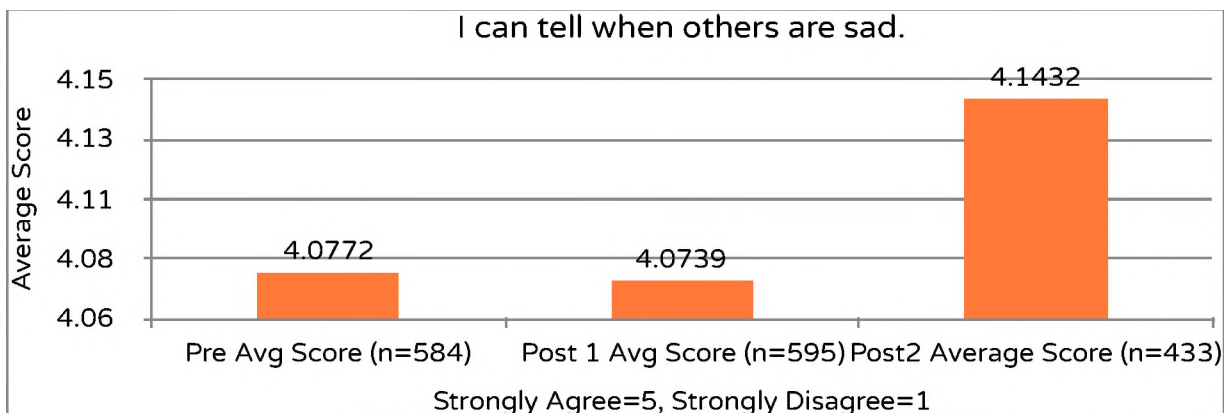
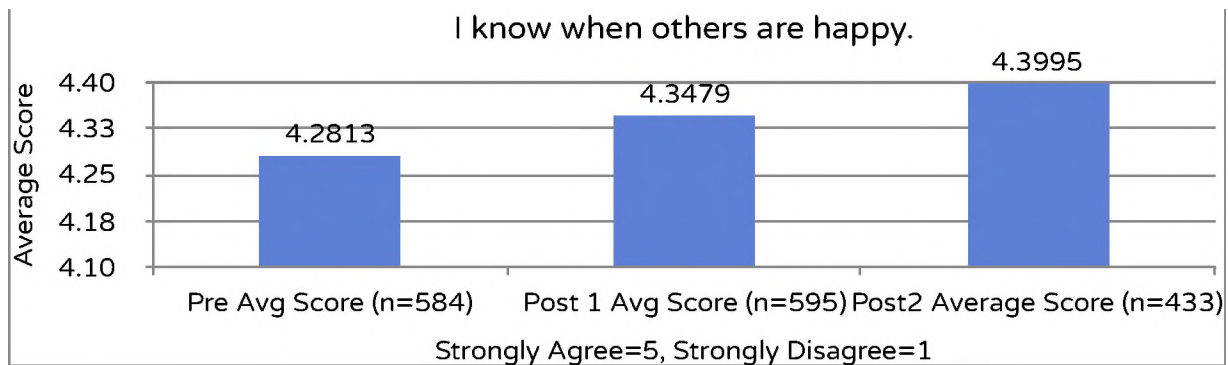




Figure 3



Figures 4-6 represent students' feelings about interacting with a child with a disability. As illustrated in the figures below, students moved from rating themselves as neutral/undecided at the beginning of the program to agreeing with the statements about their feelings regarding children with disabilities by the end of the program. Students made the most gains in Figure 5, "I'm willing to play with a child with a disability" and Figure 6, "I have things in common with kids with disabilities," particularly from Post 1 (prior to meeting their Nora Friends) to Post 2 (at the end of the project). Indeed, the experiential learning component of the project had a powerful effect on participating students, who, as set for the below, attributed their change in behavior and mindset about children with disabilities to the experience of engaging in inclusive activities with their Nora Friends.

Figure 4

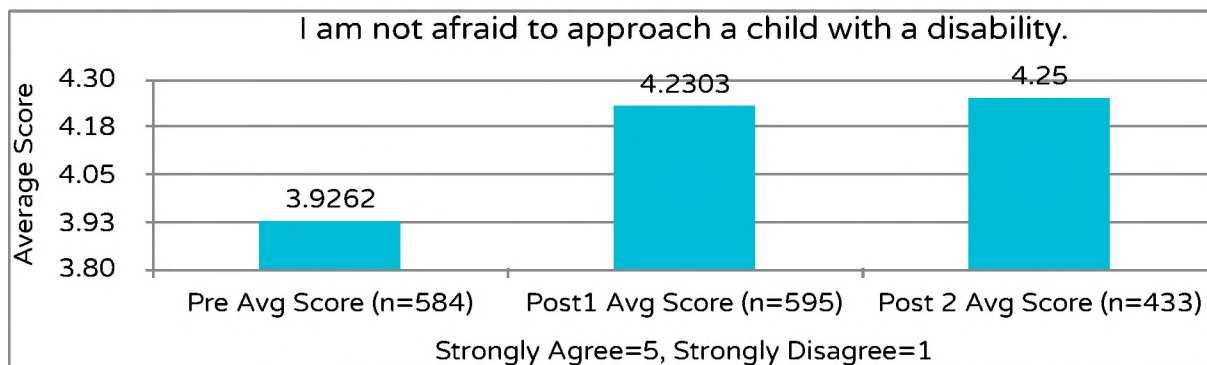




Figure 5

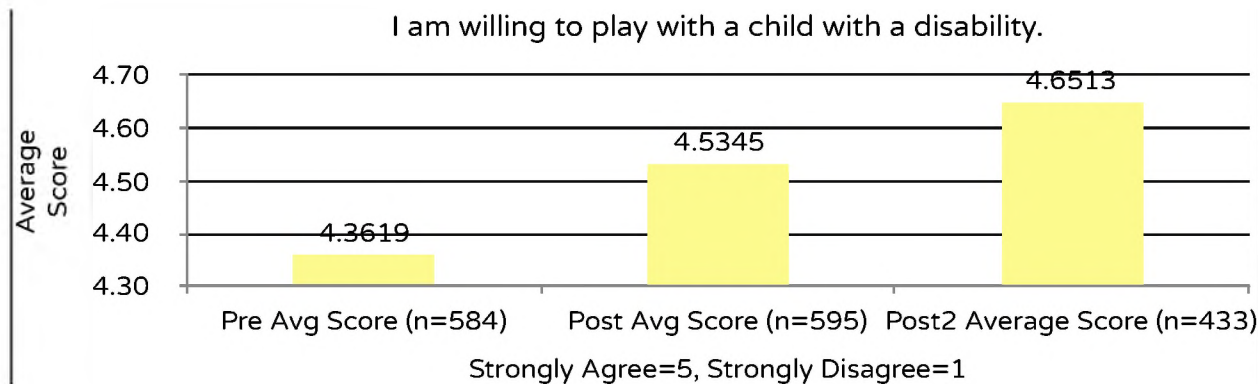
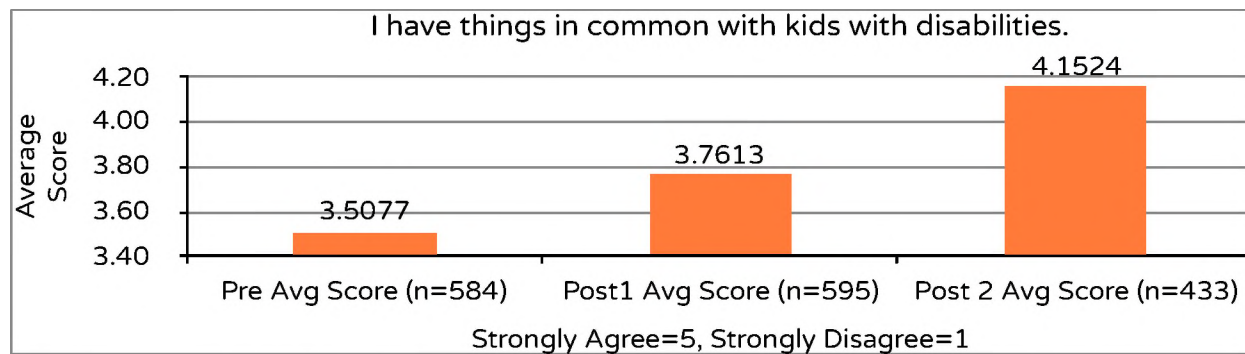


Figure 6



The student survey data illustrated in the graphs above is promising evidence that the project positively impacts participating students' thoughts and behaviors about children with disabilities. The next section focuses on student responses to open-ended survey questions that support the quantitative findings.

Qualitative Findings

Students were asked a series of open-ended questions at the end of the final student survey. Their responses were analyzed using pattern coding in which statements were grouped by general themes. Due to the large number of responses, pattern codes are displayed in the tables below with the corresponding percentage of student responses per theme.

Tables 2 shows student responses to the open-ended question: "What is the most important thing you learned from your Nora Friend?" Many students reported that accepting people for who they are was the most important thing that they learned from their Nora Friend, and the same percent of students reported that they admired qualities in their Nora Friends such as being happy, out-going, or good at an activity.



Table 2

What is the most important thing you learned from your Nora Friend? (n=433)

Theme	Percent
To Accept people for who they are	20%
Admiring specific qualities about Nora Friend	20%
We have things in common with our Nora Friends	10%
Differences should be celebrated	10%
Nobody is normal	9%
To respect and include everyone	8%
Being friends with people different from you is fun	6%
How to be a good friend	5%
To be kind to others	5%
To show empathy to others	4%
Perseverance	3%

When students were asked “What lesson or activity about people with disabilities was most important to you,” 40% of students described activities they did with their Nora Friend and how those activities helped them learn what they held in common with their Nora Friend as represented in Table 3 below.



Table 3

What lesson or activity about people with disabilities was most important to you? (n=433)

Theme	Percent
Activities with Nora Friend	40%
Learning about Nora Friend's disability	14%
Nobody is normal	12%
Don't know	10%
Creating a documentary or portfolio on Nora Friend	9%
How to be a good friend to all people	6%
Nora Night	4%
All of them	4%
Empathy	1%

Students reported a number of ways that their thoughts and beliefs changed about being friends with a person with disabilities (see Table 4). The two themes that were the most prevalent in student responses were that they had a lot in common with children with disabilities and that The Nora Project made them more comfortable approaching and interacting with children with disabilities.



Table 4

How have your thoughts and beliefs changed about being friends with a person with disabilities? (n=433)

Theme	Percent
Kids with disabilities are just like anyone else	49%
More comfortable approaching a child with a disability	29%
No change	9%
Learned to be less judgmental	6%
Learned how to be more kind	5%
Stand up for people with disabilities	2%

Students also described ways in which they will use what they learned from The Nora Project after the end of the program (see Table 5). Themes of acceptance, kindness and making friends with people with disabilities were described the most in student responses.

Table 5

How will you use what you learned from The Nora Project in your life? (n=433)

Theme	Percent
Accept people for who they are	29%
Be friends with people with disabilities	26%
Be kind	22%
Help others	11%
Be empathetic	6%
Include others	6%

Another question that students were asked was “Have you noticed a change in the way that your classmates interact with one another this year?” Four hundred one (401) students responded to this question: 67% responded “yes,” 26% responded “no,” and 7% responded “I don’t know.” While not every student that answered the question described what change they saw in their classmates, a number of students described their classmates being kinder, more understanding, or more willing to include others. For those students that responded no, those that described why said that their classmates were already nice or that they witnessed cliques, bullying or “drama” that did not change over the course of the school year.

The qualitative student survey data shows that students’ thoughts and feelings about children with disabilities changed because of The Nora Project. Students reported being more accepting of others, more open to starting friendships with children with disabilities, and kinder to their fellow classmates. These themes are also present in the open-ended survey responses from teachers reported in the section below.



My students became much more empathetic toward others. They would show these skills when on the playground for grade-level recess time, especially if they saw students not being treated respectfully by other students.



Teacher Survey Data

Teachers were asked to complete a survey after each phase of the project. The survey questions were a mixture of process evaluation (measuring to what extent program activities have been implemented as intended) and outcome evaluation (measuring program effects to the target population) questions. The majority of questions on the survey were open-ended. Process evaluation questions were used as a way to target technical assistance to teachers implementing The Nora Project curriculum and promote continuous program quality improvement. The outcome evaluation questions explored participating student outcomes as well as Nora Friend outcomes. Survey findings outlined below focus on the outcome evaluation questions. Qualitative findings from each question were analyzed using the same methods as the student data. Pattern codes were developed and themes from the pattern codes were used to develop conceptual models. Given that substantially fewer teachers participated in the program (n=22), direct quotes are shared to illustrate themes in the paragraphs below.



Project Leaders and supporting educators coming together at training camp for professional development, community building and curriculum training.

In order to gain more insight into the impact of the project on their students' behavior, teachers were asked, "What is the most important thing that your students learned as a result of participating in The Nora Project?" Similar themes of accepting others for who they are, finding commonalities with Nora Friends and exhibiting kindness and empathy with fellow classmates emerged from the teacher survey data. The quotes below illustrate these themes.

On acceptance:

To include others, be kind, to accept each other's differences, and to be proud of their own differences.

Accepting the differences of all students, no matter what their challenges may be. Empathy has been very visible in my classroom on account of the program.

On finding common ground with Nora Friends:

My students loved having visits with their Nora friends. They learned that someone that they might have thought was different than them actually had a lot in common with them!

On extending empathy and kindness to fellow classmates:

My students became much more empathetic toward others. They would show these skills when on the playground for grade-level recess time, especially if they saw students not being treated respectfully by other students.

Teachers also reported changes that they saw in their students that they attributed to participating in The Nora Project. Several teachers described changes in individual student's behavior as a result of The Nora Project as illustrated in the quotes below.

Yes, I have noticed some changes. Certain students who in the past have been perceived as trouble makers shined during our activity days.

I noticed that some of my students became more outgoing through this project. They became more comfortable with each other which helped classroom management this school year because students were invested into more than just learning and working together on an academic level. They came to class excited about more than just books and curriculum, they came with an eagerness to collaborate on behalf of our Nora Friend.

Teachers also described how their students' comfort level making friends with children with disabilities changed positively over the course of the school year.

My kiddos make it a point to go see their Nora Friends, invite them to eat lunch, hang out with them at recess. They have gone up to sing them happy birthday. They have really loved getting to know them as more than a buddy.

Yes, I feel my students were nervous and apprehensive at first. One girl was actually shaking. Towards the end of the program, they were hugging [their Nora Friend] and were comfortable with her and the other Nora Friends at our school.

At the end of the program, teachers were asked to reflect on the question, "Have you noticed any changes in the culture of your classroom that you attribute to The Nora Project?" All of the teachers except for one indicated that they had seen positive changes to their classroom's culture as a result of participating in The Nora Project. The one teacher that said no, also stated that her classroom was participating in the project for a second year, and described her students as "already accepting and kind." A consistent theme in teachers' comments about their classroom culture was that The Nora Project helped to foster community among classmates. This sense of community translated into students being kinder to classmates who were new or different from them and more inclusive. Several teachers summed up this phenomenon with the following quotes.

The overall culture in my classroom reflected a stronger knit community and a general sense of understanding, flexibility, and adaptability. Students learned these skills during Nora Project visits.

Because I teach middle school, my students rotate to different teachers throughout the day. I felt that my "Nora Project Class" had a deeper sense of community than my other classes. They would fend for each other in the hallways, share with other students about "OUR" project and the overall vibe of each and every day was far more positive because there was a deeper willingness to work together.

Teachers were asked to describe any changes that they observed with their classes' Nora Friends as a result of participating in the program. Many teachers described Nora Friends becoming more comfortable and out-going with their typically-developing peers. They also described that Nora Friends made friends as shown in the quotes below.

YES! At the beginning it was hard to get some of them into the building... they were shy and apprehensive. At our Nora Night, they ran in, found their friends and made themselves at home!

[A Nora Friend] became more and more comfortable. At first he was intimidated by the size of our building. He was more and more excited with each visit. His mom told us that he spoke about our project outside of visiting days and greatly anticipated the next visit. He even remembered student names by the time the project concluded. His mom's stress seemed to melt after visiting with us too. She felt comfortable arriving and just letting [her son] and the students interact without having to have a watchful eye over [him] the whole time as she has to in other social settings.

Teacher survey data show promising outcomes for typically-developing students, which support the student survey data and provide more detail and insight into changes in student behavior. Teachers reported changes in Nora Friends' behavior, as well. More in-depth results of Nora Friends' experiences with the project are reported in the section below.



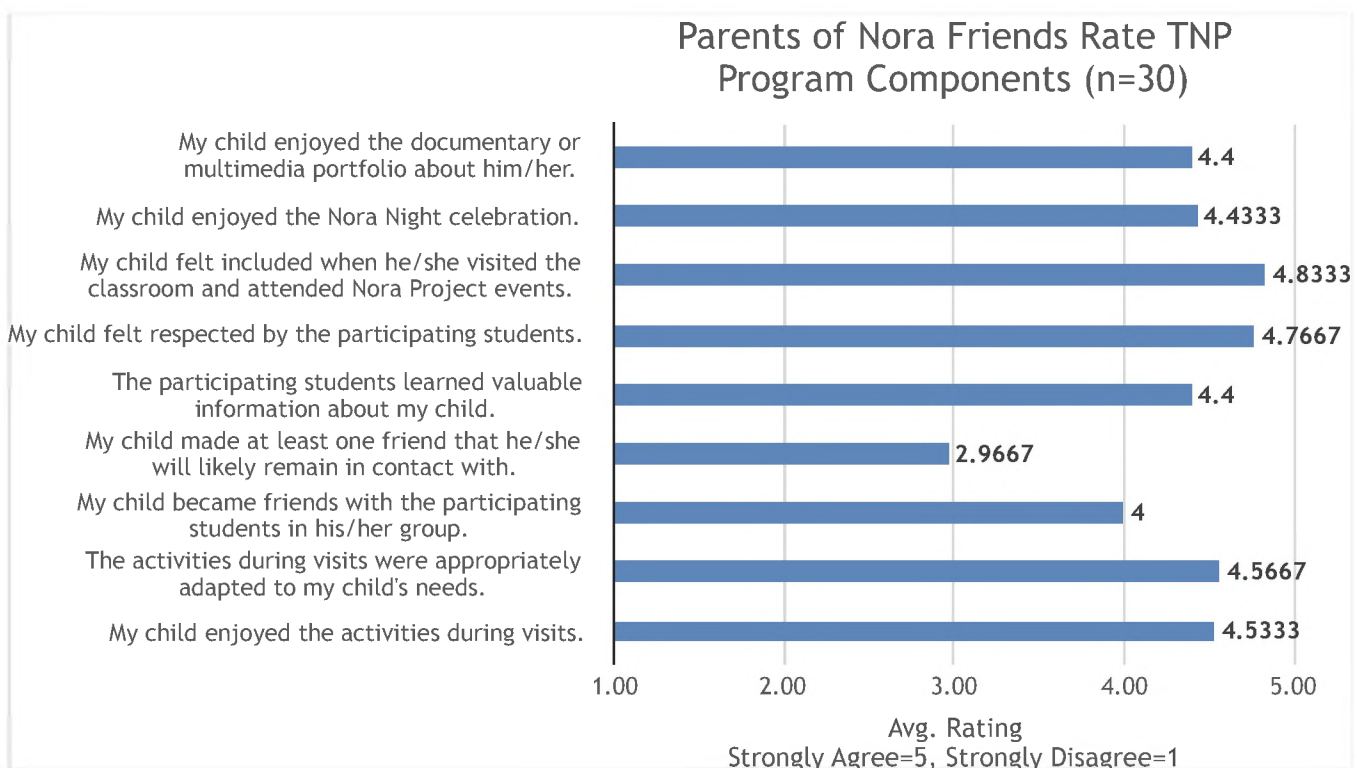
The overall culture in my classroom reflected a stronger knit community and a general sense of understanding, flexibility, and adaptability. Students learned these skills during Nora Project visits.



Nora Friend Parent Survey Data

Nora Friend parents and caretakers were sent a survey at the end of the program. Parents and caretakers for thirty Nora Friends (nearly half of all participating Nora Friends) responded to the survey. The survey asked parents to rate the extent to which they agreed with statements about The Nora Project program components for their child. For almost all statements, parents, on average, either agreed or strongly agreed that The Nora Project was meeting objectives. Nearly all parents strongly agreed that their child felt included when he/she visited the classroom and attended Nora Project events. Almost all parents also strongly agreed that their child felt respected by participating students. One statement received a neutral average rating: “My child made at least one friend that he/she will likely remain in contact with.” As set forth further below, this is a program component The Nora Project aims to address in the coming year. The graph below shows average ratings for each Nora Friend parent and caretaker survey question:

Figure 7



Parents were asked to describe any benefits their children experienced as a result of participating in The Nora Project. Many parents described the in-depth social interactions between their children and the participating students. Specifically, parents described how The Nora Project provided them with that opportunity when they had no similar opportunities in their communities, as the quote below illustrates:

Knowing hope for a generation that is compassionate instead of afraid of my child. Feeling included in play and having children join in her favorite pastimes, but also asking her to try new ones. Seeing friends in the community and feeling less isolation.

Another theme that was prevalent in parent responses was the importance of showing students that realizing that they have common ground with children with disabilities (seen also in student and teacher data). The Nora Project provided children with disabilities an opportunity to share their stories and engage in activities with typically-developing children as a way to challenge assumptions about having a disability and what it means to be “normal.” One parent describes the benefits of The Nora Project as:

New friends and the ability to share with a group of kids that we're all more alike than we are different. I was also incredibly impressed with the school. It was wonderful to see how they are teaching the kids to problem solve, adapt as needed, and of course be empathetic.

Parents were also asked in what ways can The Nora Project be more beneficial to children with disabilities and their families. Parents gave valuable constructive feedback that spoke to specific improvements to program components and/or ways to promote friendship between their children and the children in participating classrooms. In order to make the first Activity Day visit as smooth as possible, one parent suggested the following:

Maybe have a printout of faces and names of all the participating “friends” for a visual prior/during visit for my child to study. Maybe also include what types questions/ approaches do family/Nora friends welcome so all are educated on how to greet/meet future special friends.

Another suggestion was to have an inclusion specialist develop activities and strategies for adapting them so that they are appropriate for all children of all abilities. Many parents wanted ways to offer and promote activities and social interactions outside of school between Nora Friends and their typically-developing peers. Several parents also suggested circulating a contact list of participating families so that families can contact other families outside of school. These suggestions and many others were incorporated in program improvements for the next school year. Please see the Next Steps section for a description of program improvements and data collection strategies to be implemented in the 2018-19 school year.



Knowing hope for a generation that is compassionate instead of afraid of my child. Feeling included in play and having children join in her favorite pastimes, but also asking her to try new ones. Seeing friends in the community and feeling less isolation.



LIMITATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Data from the outcome evaluation show that The Nora Project was a success overall. Typically-developing students increased their knowledge about living with a disability, empathy, and being a good friend. Through their experience of meeting and engaging in activities with a Nora Friend, typically developing students challenged their assumptions of what it means to be “normal.” Students realized that they had things in common with their Nora Friends, and as a result were more comfortable approaching other children with disabilities to make friends. Teachers overwhelmingly reported that TNP had an impact on their classroom culture. Teachers reported changes in student behaviors such as students previously monitored for negative behaviors behaving more positively because of program participation. Teachers also reported that since beginning The Nora Project, classroom management became easier. Teachers attributed this change in classroom management to the skills students acquired through the program such as working as a team, problem-solving, adapting, and being empathetic to not only to Nora Friends, but also to fellow classmates. Parents of Nora Friends and teachers reported that many Nora Friends who were initially shy or uncomfortable coming to Nora Friend activities became comfortable, assertive and forged friendships with participating students. Overall, The Nora Project has made a unique contribution to social emotional programs aiming address a decline in empathy by using thoughtful lesson plans and classroom activities along with experiential learning rooted in inclusive practices and play. The Nora Project experience—taken as a whole, teaches skills, values, and beliefs about our common humanity and what it means to live in community.

Limitations

While these findings are promising in that many of the student and Nora Friend outcomes were confirmed through several sources, this evaluation relied heavily on qualitative methods. It is not known to what extent these outcomes impacted classroom behavior since behavior data was not included in the evaluation. Also, while the student survey asked questions on empathy, altruism, and safe school environment, it is not a research-validated measure, therefore it is uncertain to what extent the results are replicable. Further, while program staff made frequent check-ins with teachers and provided technical assistance when needed, there was no fidelity check to ensure teachers were implementing the curriculum as intended. Another limitation to the evaluation is that Nora Friends themselves were not surveyed. This was not an oversight so much as program staff and the evaluation consultant struggled to develop appropriate measures for doing so. The limitations mentioned above have been accounted for, and changes to the program and evaluation have been put in place for school year 2018-19. Please see the Next Steps section for more details.

Next Steps

A number of program improvements and data collection strategies were developed in preparation for the next school year as a result of stakeholder feedback. Program improvements made to The Nora Project fall into three categories: (1) Strengthening the curriculum to flow better with the academic calendar and including more inclusion and technology support for participating educators; (2) Strengthening learning objectives for participating students and providing more opportunities for reflection, creativity, and student-led learning; and (3) Creating more systems to ensure The Nora Project is implemented with fidelity. Descriptions of program improvements are bulleted below.



- Reorganized the phases of the program to match (approximately) academic quarters. The project will now be delivered in four phases, with the work of the first two phases continuing throughout the entire year. This allows for better pacing of the work of the project, particularly in the second half of the year when students are working on their documentaries.
- Added additional lessons and supports around Best Practices for Inclusion. Students will spend more time learning about and reflecting on how they can be respectful, welcoming, and supportive hosts to their Nora Friends. Students will take time to learn about their Nora Friends' needs and consider how to best meet their needs so that the Activity Day visits are safe, comfortable, and inclusive for all. The Nora Project staff improved the training (covered in more detail below) and supporting documents for teachers, providing more resources for them to share with students to answer their questions and prepare them to host Nora Friend visits.
- Emphasized friendship as a theme for the documentaries. Due to feedback from Nora Friend parents, students and teachers will focus their energy on the work of building relationships, so the documentaries will now be centered around the three essential questions (What does it mean to be a good friend? What does it mean to be 'normal?' Why do we share our stories with others?") rather than on what the students learned about their Nora Friend's disability. In addition, students learn about the importance of storytelling and consider what they really want to share with the world about their friendship with their Nora Friends.
- Emphasized student self-reflection in the revised program materials. Students will now receive a Nora Project Journal, complete with labels with journal prompts for many of the lessons across the curriculum. The curriculum now includes regular opportunities for students to reflect on what they learn in different lessons and how that applies to their relationships with Nora Friends and anyone else with whom they interact. The goal of the reflection is to help with transfer of ideas taught through The Nora Project to students' daily lives outside of the classroom.

In addition, specific program improvements based on Nora Friend parent feedback were incorporated for the next school year. They are:

- Hired an inclusion specialist to provide ongoing training and support to all participating classrooms throughout the year.
- Created an array of materials to improve Nora Friends' comfort when visiting participating classrooms.
- Created more opportunities to connect through social media, including a closed Facebook group for parents of all participants.



- Hired an Outreach Coordinator to plan monthly activities in the community so that students and their Nora Friends have more opportunities to interact and deepen their friendships.
- Hired a Director of Alumni and Community Programming to develop programs that will enable Nora Friends and participating students to remain engaged with one another after completion of the flagship project.

A number of program delivery changes have been made to address scaling-up The Nora Project and the challenges of implementation fidelity and effectiveness during this growth period. Those program delivery changes are:

- Participating schools must identify a staff member who will serve as Project Leader. The Nora Project will offer a stipend to this individual, and payment of the stipend will be dependent upon fulfilling certain requirements during each Phase of the project, starting with attending the two- day training camp.
- The Nora Project Training Camp, held July 31-August 1, 2018, included the following modules:

On Day 1:

- Keynote speaker Michelle Borba, author of *Unselfie: Why Empathetic Kids Succeed in Our All-About Me World*, Simon & Schuster (May 2017), spoke about why empathy education leads to better outcomes in students relationships, professional lives, and overall happiness as adults.
- Teachers received training on the first phase of the curriculum, including how to deliver the materials to students.
- Teachers learned how to recruit Nora Friend participants by working with district and local organizations.
- Teachers were trained on the best practices for inclusion of students with disabilities, including how to talk and answer common questions about disability, how to adapt a classroom space, and how to adapt games activities. Teachers were also taught how to transfer this learning to their students.



Teachers bonding at training camp, building a web of common connections to The Nora Project mission.



On Day 2:

- Teachers received leadership training, so they are prepared to lead their peers in the work of The Nora Project. They also learned about how to problem solve if challenges arise with various aspects of the project.
 - A panel of past teachers and parents of participating Nora Friends reflected on their experiences with the project and took questions from the audience.
 - Teachers learned Mindfulness techniques and how to integrate them into The Nora Project curriculum to enhance students' empathy.
 - Teachers received training in technology integration which will allow them to effectively utilize iPads and accessories provided by The Nora Project.
- Rather than getting trained once on curriculum for the whole year, teachers will receive training on curriculum materials a few weeks before starting each phase so that the instruction is fresh in their minds.
 - Project Leaders will be required to schedule four mid-phase check-in meetings with the Program Director, one during each phase.
 - Project Leaders will have a dashboard that is shared with the Program Director. This will allow them to share key documents, communicate important dates, and share information about their progress in each Phase. The Program Director will be monitoring these closely to assess the progress of each school.
 - The Program Director will be available for office hours on a weekly basis to support teachers if they require it.

Several evaluation changes were made for the upcoming school year. Descriptions of the changes are provided in the bulleted list below.

- Incorporated a research-validated student measure (EmQue-CA) to measure empathy. The EmQue-CA measures several different types of empathy with age-appropriate statements rated on a 3-point Likert scale. The student impact survey includes EmQue-CA questions as well as questions that touch on children with disabilities.
- Added demographics to the student impact survey as well as created questions to generate individual student codes so that individual responses could be tracked across the school year.
- Developed a quasi-experimental design evaluation with a control group to further test the impact of TNP on students of all abilities.
- Piloting a Nora Friend exit survey for the 2018-19 school year.
- Developing a longitudinal study of typically-developing students and Nora Friends who have exited the program.



CONCLUSIONS

This evaluation was designed to measure goals that define The Nora Project’s mission. Findings indicated promising outcomes that support the mission, but also revealed changes that needed to be made to the program as well as limitations to the evaluation. Program staff used evaluation data and feedback from key stakeholders to make program changes that will strengthen the project overall. The evaluation measures added for next year address limitations outlined in this report, are more aligned with the mission, and will more effectively track outcomes. The Nora Project is poised to scale up its programming in more schools and demonstrate evidence that it is living up to its mission – teaching empathy and sparking friendship between students and their peers with disabilities.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Holly Lewandowski, M.A. is responsible for overall project management, communication with The Nora Project staff, evaluation tool development, logic model development, data collection, analysis and report writing. Holly started her company, Evaluation for Change, Inc. in 2008 and she has worked as an evaluation consultant for the past 10 years on many education evaluations spanning early childhood to post-secondary with institutions such as the Ounce of Prevention Fund, Illinois Education Research Council, City Colleges of Chicago, Westat, and Roosevelt University and University of Illinois at Chicago. Additionally, she has held positions in evaluation and research at both DePaul and Northwestern Universities. She earned her MA in Sociology at DePaul University and BA in Anthropology at Antioch College.