

Benefits of Inclusion Outside the Classroom

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### Abstract

Education for people with disabilities has improved dramatically since the fine-tuning of the inclusive education. Students attain higher levels of academic and vocational achievement. A deficit exists, however, in social skills among people with disabilities, stemming from a lack of social interactions and interpersonal cooperation. This insufficiency develops due to inadequate opportunities outside of school to form long-lasting friendships and learn essential communication skills. After-school programs are imperative for students with disabilities to supplement their social education. Outside-school programs facilitate meaningful relationships between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. This paper explores the advantages of inclusive education, how after-school programs benefit students with disabilities, discusses the causes of and solutions to exclusion from these programs, and demonstrates that after-school programs are a positive and plausible alternative for social education.

#### Essential Questions:

- How do inclusive classrooms improve the social and academic skills of students with disabilities? What are their deficits?
- How can interactions outside of school improve the social skills of students with disabilities?
- Why are students with disabilities excluded from outside-classroom opportunities?
- What laws are in place to encourage interactions outside of school? What can be done to further these interactions?

### Socially Integrating Students with Disabilities Outside the Classroom

The achievements of Frida Kahlo, Stephen Hawking, Helen Keller, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt spread far beyond the effects of their disabilities. Each revolutionized their worlds and are defined by their accomplishments, not their disabilities. Despite their societal contributions, including people with disabilities in school and the workplace was a highly controversial topic. Until the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1974, and the American Disability Act (ADA) in 1990, it was legal to discriminate students based on their disability, potentially denying the access to education (IDEA, 1975; ADA, 1990). Despite recent advancements in education for students with disabilities, problems still exist. Students are not accepted for their differences, instead being hidden away as a problem or embarrassment. “[T]here are these famous screaming rooms that some schools have where teachers put kids when they're acting out, when they're out of control.” (Sanchez, 2012).

While lingering deficits exist, improvements in teaching methods and integration tactics have advanced education for students with disabilities drastically. Two main options for educating students with disabilities include mainstreaming and full inclusion. Mainstreaming follows the guidelines of the IDEA, which states that students should learn in a general classroom whenever possible, returning to a specialized classroom only if needed. A newer option, full-inclusion, believes that students should remain in the general classroom full-time. A student with disabilities will be placed in the least restrictive environment possible, depending on their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) (Morin, 2016). In spite of minor differences, these education options provide students with disabilities an unprecedented opportunity to grow academically and socially.

Studies show that cooperative learning improves the academic performance of students with disabilities. When included in general classrooms, students performed 10 to 25% higher on standardized testing than their peers taught solely in special education classrooms (Sencibaugh & Sencibaugh, 2016). Students with disabilities, when placed in a general academic classroom, face new academic challenges, which force them to adapt and grow. Additionally, students are exposed to age-appropriate and higher quality academic curriculum, which allows for thorough understanding of material and greater mastery of content (McGee, 2018; McMillan, 2008). Furthermore, in special education classrooms, content is reduced or slowed down to accommodate for the needs of all students, creating a deficit for students in the classroom who understand the content (Voltz, Brazil & Ford, 2001).

Beyond progress in academic achievement, inclusion increases social competence among students with disabilities. Social education is paramount for students with disabilities to succeed and allow for growth in social connection and ability, improvements in self-awareness, and development of beneficial friendships. “Extensive evidence indicates that children with disabilities are at increased risk of being isolated or bullied compared with their typically developing peers.” (Koller, Pouesard, Rummons; 2018). Previously, when isolated from students without disabilities, students with disabilities lacked the social skills to function after-school, as they were never part of a heterogeneous group (Willis, 2007). New environments provide challenges for students with disabilities to overcome, making them more independent and socially adept. When integrated, students develop vital social skills by mirroring their peers and detecting age-appropriate actions and interactions (Raschke & Bronson, 1999). Further, inclusion allows students with disabilities to form long-term relationships with students without

disabilities; a benefit they would not experience otherwise. An increased frequency of social interactions helps students build social skills and subsequently helps them form a larger social network. Finally, relationships between students with and without disabilities diminishes previous stigmas connected to students with disabilities, increasing their acceptance in general populations (McMillan, 2008; Raschke & Bronson, 1999).

Despite the extensive benefits of inclusive education, some deficiencies exist. An inability to connect with others, form friendships, and perform essential social skills can create a larger deficit for people with disabilities than problems with academics (Lawson, 2003). The ability to self-advocate and a positive attitude are determining factors in a student with disabilities performance in school (US Department of Education, 2007). “The most essential skills for people with disabilities are independence and resilience.” (Doan, 2018). Interpersonal and social abilities are a critical part of maintaining friendships, and later, keeping a job. “Lack of appropriate personal and social skills is one of the most frequently cited causes of termination of employment.” (Goodman, n.d.). “While schools address children’s learning problems, they often neglect children’s social needs and rely on parents and/or professionals to handle these problems.” (Lawson, 2003). The majority of teachers polled believed they did not have the necessary tools to support students with disabilities in the general classroom-- creating a gap between the social support students with disabilities require and what they receive. Over 60% of public school teachers believed they lacked the preparation to care for the social and emotional needs of students with disabilities (McMillan, 2008). The development of social skills for students with disabilities is of utmost importance, so if skills are not addressed in the classroom, outer classroom instruction must exist.

### Interactions Outside of School and their Benefits

After-school activities are essential in promoting vocational and social skills in students with disabilities. Extracurricular activities improve the social competence, self-esteem, aspirations of students; special education students are no exception. Participating in after-school programs is one of the most beneficial activities for students with disabilities. Research asserts that high-quality after-school activities “promote positive child and youth development, support in-school learning and facilitate the growth of a skilled workforce” (Wiley & Niedzielski-Eichner, 2015). Benefits are also seen in the classroom. Students are able to develop vocational, academic, and leadership skills. After-school activities provide a chance for students to enhance decision making skills, self determination, and leadership responsibilities. (SSD, 2018; NCTI & CITED, 2006).

Extracurricular activities not only provide new opportunities, but also advance students’ social competence. In school, students improve their academic skills and general behavior; however, extracurriculars provide a social supplement for students with disabilities. Further, when placed in after-school programs, students with disabilities are able to interact with their non-disabled peers more frequently and are able to engage in a way not available in classrooms (Kicking the Spectrum, 2013). Clubs counteract the predominantly-adult environment students with disabilities learn in by exposing them to a large number of students their age (SSD, 2018). By pairing a socially inept student with a student versed in social interactions, students with disabilities are exposed to applicable social habits and are able to integrate them into later interactions (Lawson, 2003). Exposure to students with social competence allows students with

disabilities to model their behavior, empowering them with essential skills, including communication, flexibility, initiative, and interpersonal skills (Moroney, 2015).

Outside of school interactions also provide a social niche and increase opportunities to make friends. (Rudy, 2018). “It is often that as a society, individuals are viewed solely on their external limitations. However it is often forgotten that apart from their disabilities, these youth have the same general interests, energy levels and social needs as their peers.” (Kicking the Spectrum, 2013). Through clubs and camps, students with disabilities are placed in an environment which focuses on a student’s strengths, understands their weaknesses, and celebrates their diversity. This environment increases student’s self-confidence and creates a sense of belonging (Lawson, 2003). These after-school programs also connect students with similar interests, prompting meaningful friendships which extend to the classroom (SSD, 2018). Making friends outside of their normal classroom teaching students with disabilities valuable skills, including teamwork, supporting others, and trying new things (Rudy, 2018). Inclusion, as described above, increases a student’s social development in ways not achieved in segregated environments and allow them to build meaningful relationships. Finally, inclusion creates an environment where all students are appreciated for their differences (ExtendedED Notes, 2017).

#### The Deficit of Outside School Inclusion

Providing quality after-school programming is crucial for students with disabilities. It offers students of all abilities a chance to experience enrichment activities and develop meaningful relationships in the community. However, millions of the neediest children, including students with disabilities lack access to such programs (Wiley & Niedzielski-Eichner, 2015). Statistics show that students with disabilities have lower participation rates in after-school

programming than their non-disabled peers (Eriksson, Welander & Granlund, 2007). Studies also emphasize existing barriers that limit students with disabilities' participation rates. This includes diminished integration and participation during the school day, lack of programming, and insufficient support (Wiley & Niedzielski-Eichner, 2015).

A major cause of limited participation in after-school programs is the lack of qualified staff and beneficial programs. According to the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council, families experience considerable hardship when searching for suitable and beneficial after-school programming. In the survey, 72% of families reported having difficulty finding, joining, or keeping childcare and 53% said they had previously removed their child due to inadequate support or training. To further illustrate the lack of appropriate programs, 82% of those surveyed had a need for after-school support; however, only 36% knew of a program which would accept their child (Tynan, 2015). Teacher enthusiasm and training are imperative to providing effective after-school programming. Quality of staff is essential in providing the necessary support in after-school programs. Studies show that staff have a key role in the effectiveness of programming and the impact students gain from the program (Taylor, 2013). A frequently observed impediment to programs is understaffing, obstructing the necessary individual attention needed for each student (Tynan, 2015).

Although less impactful than the shortage of training and opportunities, other barriers exist. First, parents of students with disabilities often devalue the benefits of after-school programming. Parents are often focused on numerous therapies, medical appointments, and academics and overlook the benefits after-school programs provide. Families also might not have time or money to spend on these added activities (Rudy, 2018). Finally, many services available



for students with disabilities end with the school day, vastly diminishing available programs in which to participate. Programs that are available overwhelmingly provide inadequate transportation or training based on an individual's disability-- waning a parent's interest and willingness to enroll (Doan, 2018; Ricco, 2018).

#### Current Laws and the Furthering of After-School Programs

A shortage of impactful after-school programs and teacher training arises from current laws' vagueness. All laws regarding the education of students with disabilities, including IDEA and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), stress the importance of participation in inclusive environments (Hughes & Carter, 2008). Congress passed these laws to prevent discrimination in the classroom on the basis of disability and do so by requiring students be placed in the least restrictive environment. These laws help students with disabilities have access to the proper education based on their individualized needs (Crabtree, 2016; Willis, 2007). The same laws apply to after-school programing; Section 504 of the IDEA and the ADA require that reasonable accommodations be provided for students with disabilities in after-school programs (Crabtree, 2016), and students with IEPs must have equal access to programs offered to their non-disabled peers (New Jersey Department of Human Services, 2013). The extent of these accommodations and inclusions, however, vary case-to-case. "Schools are required to provide a running car, not a Ferrari." (Doan, 2018). The quality of accommodations depends on the budget of program and the degree to which an accommodation alters a program (Crabtree, 2016). The phrase, 'reasonable accommodations', leaves wiggle room for interpretation. Accommodations may not be provided if it fundamentally changes the program, poses a safety hazard, or creates unnecessary burden on the school. Additionally, students are entitled to having their need met,

but schools can change the amount of support they provide a student. For example, if a student uses an aide during the school day, it is possible that they will not have one during an after-school program. Finally, schools may not be obligated to provide accommodations based on the program. If a club or event is school sponsored, the school must provide all necessary accommodations; if it is a private or selective program, it may not provide accommodations outlined on a student's IEPs (New Jersey Department of Human Services, 2013).

Although laws protecting the inclusion of students with disabilities extend to after-school programs, they lack the backbone to ensure quality and beneficial programs. Other options must be explored to fill this gap. Increasing the availability and appeal of after-school activities are essential to increase participation. The first step is to create opportunities for interactions. This includes lunch groups, interest groups, or simply supporting for friendships. Additionally, educators should identify the gaps in extracurriculars that would interest students in the school and create clubs that fit the needs of students with disabilities. Increasing the accessibility and ease of access are also important to ensure participation. All of these tactics promote after-school involvement, as they improve interest and access to clubs (Mullen, 2015).

The last major way to improve after-school participation is a buddy system. Using a peer buddy system increases the social acceptance of students with disabilities in the school and, in turn, helps students gain critical social skills. Peer buddies are able to model social skills, which students with disabilities pick up and replicate. Further, peer buddies help integrate students with disabilities into the classroom and in clubs. In after-school programs, buddies would be able to help integrate students with disabilities and engage them in social interactions. Peer buddy systems are able to effectively teach social skills, as students with disabilities are more willing to

learn through observation than through a class. The system also increases the frequency of interactions between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. All of these effects are beneficial for the growth of students with disabilities by helping improve the quality of after-school programs and the readiness of student participation (Foster, 2011; Hughes & Carter, 2008).

### **Discussion**

Education for students with disabilities has improved dramatically in recent years; with innovations in the inclusion of disabled students in general classrooms, students with disabilities have a better education and can attain higher levels of academic achievement and social function (McGee, 2018). Inclusive classrooms are essential for students with disabilities to learn more advanced material and gain age-appropriate social skills. The main focus of teachers, however, is to master educational material-- not to assist in the development of social skills; this creates a gap in the social assistance students with disabilities require and what they receive (McMillan, 2008). The refinement of pertinent social skills, including interpersonal interactions, self-advocacy, and a good attitude (Doan, 2018), are more critical for future success than academic understanding. These skills contribute to employability and improving academic performance (US Department of Education, 2007). To further a trend of social and academic progress, educators must look outside the classroom. After-school activities, including clubs, are an imperative activity for students with disabilities and enable students to acquire fundamental vocational, academic, and leadership skills, including decision-making and self-determination (SSD, 2018; NCTI & CITED, 2006). In addition to improved skills, students increase the frequency of social interactions and participate in long-term friendships-- enriching the social

skills of students with disabilities, and counteracting deficits in the social education in school (Kicking the Spectrum, 2013; Rudy, 2018). Students with disabilities model the social behaviors of their non-disabled peers and imitate them in later social interactions (Lawson, 2003; Moroney, 2015). Social inclusion improves the quality and frequency of friendships for students with disabilities and exposes them to social interactions outside the special education population.

Despite the numerous benefits, social interactions outside the classroom for students with disabilities are fairly limited. Due to loopholes in laws, schools do not have to provide the utmost quality of care for students with disabilities, and clubs may exclude students if their disability impacts the club too substantially (Tynan, 2015; Doan, 2018; Crabtree, 2016)). This creates an insufficient number of after-school opportunities, harming the social education and competency of students with disabilities. To counteract this trend, quality of care and club accessibility must be improved (Mullen, 2015). Moreover, the implementation of buddy systems within the academic day and after-school clubs should be supported, as they add another level of care, along with increased social education through the modelling of social skills (Foster, 2011; Hughes & Carter, 2008). Regardless of the style, after-school programs are a fundamental part of students' with disabilities education as they build the vital skills of advocacy and interpersonal interactions.

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