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EFFECTIVE INCLUSION PRACTICES FOR THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL
SUCCESS OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

A MASTER'S THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
OF BETHEL UNIVERSITY

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CAITLIN SIEMS

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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

EFFECTIVE INCLUSION PRACTICES FOR THE ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL
SUCCESS OF STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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APPROVED

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I give all of my appreciation to my students and their families who have demonstrated the significance of inclusion and compassion to me on daily basis. Thank you to every teacher, colleague, and friend who has shared my heart for individuals with disabilities. Finally, most importantly, to my husband and sweet boys: thank you for giving me the time and days to pursue the understanding of something so valuable.

Abstract

This paper includes a comprehensive literature review of the research and best practice implications for providing effective inclusion in the general education setting to individuals with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, it reviews the relevant research regarding effective inclusive practices in adaptive sports, unified programs, and extracurricular activities. The review seeks to answer questions regarding the impact inclusion has on the self-concept and adaptive behaviors of individuals with intellectual disabilities and their typical functioning peers. The paper provides insights for best practice for educators and information regarding effective frameworks for inclusion in the classroom. Instructional and whole school models that include the Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS) and Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are exemplars for providing effective instruction for students with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, programs like Special Olympics Unified Sports have been shown to develop an individual's (those with intellectual disabilities and neuro-typical peers) self-concept and improve pro-social behaviors.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Since the implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 1975) and the assurance of all children be provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), children with intellectual disabilities have been offered access and accommodations to the general education curricula. Consistent with the passage of these legislations and laws, public schools have aimed to educate students with disabilities in classrooms alongside their non-disabled peers. Over the years, the passage of IDEA has motivated numerous studies to evaluate non-disabled students and to assess attitudes, understanding, and bias towards students with intellectual disabilities within the general education setting (Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, & Widaman, 2007). According to Siperstein et al. (2007), a number of studies geared towards evaluating the attitudes of non-disabled students and their perception of students with intellectual disabilities have produced positive attitudes for individuals who have had repeated contact with students with intellectual disabilities.

Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities and Inclusion

While the research has taken years to come to positive conclusions (much of the earliest United States study results reported negative or indifferent attitudes of non-disabled peers towards their intellectually disabled contemporaries), there remain questions about how these attitudes translate to inclusion outside of academics (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Specifically, studies and research around how the attitudes, perceptions, and bias of non-disabled peers affect intellectually disabled students' individual investment and participation in inclusive and/or adaptive extra-curricular activities. In addition, how do the requirements and parameters of IDEA and FAPE affect

a school district's decision-making processes in determining the need, support, and development of inclusive or adaptive extra-curricular programs and sports?

I reside and work in a school district that has a very active, highly-regarded, and well developed Special Olympics team. As a middle school special education teacher for students with intellectual disabilities, many of my students participate as members of the various activities offered by the Special Olympics program. I have witnessed how instrumental the Special Olympics program has been in developing confidence and pride for my students and their families. For several years, the school district has offered only one adaptive sport (bowling) sponsored by the Minnesota State High School League (MSHL). In the early months of the 2017 school year, the school board was approached with the option of developing an inclusive sports club, which is cost supplemented by Special Olympics Minnesota. Alternatively, the board could pursue organizing adaptive sports teams, which are currently sponsored by the MSHL. As a result, the school board determined that the district would begin to offer MSHL sponsored adaptive floor hockey, softball, and soccer. The requirements for participating in these adaptive activities requires an IQ of 71 or lower and passing a sports physical from a physician.

With these requirements in place, I continue to question what the most appropriate and inclusive decision may have been. Does offering an exclusive, adaptive program further attribute to negative or passive attitudes towards intellectually disabled peers by their classmates? Would inclusive activities eliminate negative or biased perceptions of intellectually disabled students? Finally, what is the social impact of effective inclusive practices in extra-curricular activities on a school climate and culture?

Reviewing the relevant research associated with these questions would further solidify and define my role as an advocate for my students. Additionally, it would provide credible knowledge and insight to my colleagues and administration. Additionally, it could potentially be a resource to the school board in order to offer credible feedback regarding effective inclusive practices.

Explanation of Terms

Intellectual disability (as defined by IDEA, 2004)

“significant sub-average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently [at the same time] with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely effects a child’s educational performance (Part300A 300.8 c 6; Lowrey, Hollingshead, Howery, & Bishop, 2017).”

Typical peers

Children in the educational setting who are receiving their education without the support provided by an individual education plan (IEP) or 504 plan and who do not have medically diagnosed disability that impacts learning and adaptive behavior.

Inclusion

Any method, framework, teaching or coaching philosophy that capitalizes on the skill sets and abilities of all individuals, regardless of their cognitive or physical capabilities. Inclusion is relative to equity and fair access to educational curricula and social settings or activities.

Adaptive behaviors

Adaptive behaviors are the collection of everyday living skills performed by a person daily. Adaptive behaviors include those behaviors necessary to function appropriately and successfully in social settings, educationally, and vocationally.

To facilitate further understanding of what inclusion appears to be in educational practice and in social activities, it is necessary to review the available information about inclusion's origins in U.S. and global schools. Additionally, reviewing the research relevant to the impact inclusive instruction and programming has on individuals with developmental disabilities and their typical peers provides helpful insights for educators and advocates, alike.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature Search Procedures

To locate the research for this thesis, searches of the ERIC, Academic Search Premier, and EBSCO MegaFILE were conducted for publications from 2002-2017. The list of resources was narrowed by only reviewing peer-reviewed journals that capitalized on the effectiveness of inclusion in the general education setting, both curricular and extra-curricular. The key words used in these searches were “individuals with intellectual disabilities,” “effective inclusive practices,” “impact of inclusion on individuals with intellectual disabilities,” “inclusion practices and intellectual disabilities,” and “unified sports and individuals with intellectual disabilities.” The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on effective inclusion practices in three sections: Evaluating inclusion in the United States and globally; impact of inclusion on children with intellectual disabilities and typical children in the general education setting; and the impact of inclusive practices on individuals with intellectual disabilities in extra-curricular or unified sports programs.

Evaluating Inclusion in the United States and Globally

Ballard and Dymond (2017) cite the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA, 2004) as the catalyst and hallmark of contemporary special education services. In other words, IDEA and the clarification of inclusion in the general education setting puts forward the concept that all students are provided the opportunity to be educated with the same curricula. Additionally, students are given access to the same curricula measures, assessments, and the content rendered appropriate by their individual education plan (IEP). Ballard and Dymond (2017) note that the research conducted on inclusion and

inclusive practices under IDEA has improved the education of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Similarly, they note that a commitment by educators to providing the content in a manner fitting to the needs of all students further solidifies the philosophy behind inclusion. Ballard and Dymond (2017) applaud educators and schools that stand behind the commitment to educating individuals with disabilities in the general education setting, yet concluded that questions remained in how to appropriately balance the needs of all students with the functional and sometimes transitional needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities in mainstream classroom settings.

Ballard and Dymond (2017) sought to better pinpoint and discern what areas of modern inclusive practices required more research and investment. Citing the essential role of school “stakeholders” (educators, administrators, paraprofessionals, and parents), they conducted a literature review that closely examined and synthesized the attitudes and beliefs of those providing an educational experience to individuals with disabilities in the general education setting.

Using four themes to evaluate the literature, Ballard and Dymond (2017) reviewed and compiled the literature relative to Method of Access, Type of Curriculum, Barriers and Concerns, and Benefits. Each article was categorized to meet the standards of the review, such as articles relevant to K-12 education. Once the research was compiled, the studies reviewed included 216 special educators, 81 general education teachers, 58 parents, 35 paraprofessionals, and 16 administrators. Within each of the four themes and the resulting categories, four to five studies were present. Overall, Ballard and Dymond (2017) determined that the stakeholders in education share similar beliefs regarding the methods and means in which individuals with disabilities access the general

education curriculum. The findings cite that individual supports afforded by an IEP (accommodations/modifications, positive behavior interventions) and a general education classroom that affords membership and high expectations for all students as critical methods for appropriate facilitation of access to the curriculum.

Yet, Ballard and Dymond (2017) describe a critical juncture of opinion regarding the purpose and true meaning of the curricula students with intellectual disabilities are being exposed to. Is it the same curriculum of their peers, but with adaptations and modifications per their IEP or is it simply access that best develops their functional skills and adaptive behaviors? Ballard and Dymond (2017) cite that some of the research prior to 2004 and the passage of IDEA suggest that educational stakeholders viewed social inclusion as the primary curriculum in the general education setting, not the standards based academic curriculum of modern educational practices.

Inclusion: An Exemplar

Citing the legislative measures and actions IDEA and FAPE, Olson, Leko, and Roberts (2016) conducted a case study to determine how expert and exemplar educators define and provide access to the general education curriculum for students with intellectual disabilities. Olson et al. (2016) targeted Ridgeview Middle School, located in the suburbs of an undisclosed midwestern state. Ridgeview was selected as an exemplar for the case study because it had received the TASH June Downing Breakthroughs in Inclusive Education Award. The award seeks to honor schools, educators, and districts which have made important investments and advancements in inclusive education, chiefly for students with significant disabilities and support needs. Olson et al. (2016) cite Ridgeview's service model of inclusion of being of the highest standard and to the

maximum extent. Using a service model called Integrated Comprehensive Services (ICS), Ridgeview Middle School abolished all pull-out classrooms and other segregated environments to the maximum extent possible. For the means of the case study, Olson et al. (2016) determined that three Ridgeview 8th grade students would be the targets of the case study. All three identified students are individuals with intellectual disabilities who completed alternative state assessments and ranged in their communication abilities. Olson et al. (2016) were granted access to the three student's IEPs and school schedules. Additionally, 12 school support personnel were invited to participate in various forms of data collection (questionnaires, interviews, classroom observations, participant reflections, and file reviews). These elements were reviewed over the course of five months in an effort to determine what inclusion at the maximum level looks like in a general education setting.

The findings of Olson et al. (2016) efforts concluded that Ridgeview Middle School's model of inclusion is effective and valuable because student access to the curriculum is shared across education personnel-not solely on the shoulders of special educators. Additionally, the personnel of Ridgeview Middle School defined access to the general education curricula in four areas: instructional and social contexts, curriculum, instruction, and collaboration.

When defining instructional and social contexts, Olson et al. (2016) note that Ridgeview Middle School's staff cited learning opportunities as the provision through which equal access to the curriculum is afforded. For example, learning and making progress in academics, socialization with peers, and relationship building. Additionally,

instructional and social contexts were defined by Ridgeview's educators as authentic and equitable learning and social interaction.

The second area of finding by Olson et al. (2016) related to Ridgeview's determination of access to the curricula within the schools. According the findings, Ridgeview's school personnel took an active and attentive role to making accommodations and supports for all students. Additionally, Olson et al. (2016) report that many of the study's reporting personnel viewed access to the curriculum beyond differentiation, and instead placed high value on authentic learning, gains, and goal progression.

A review of Ridgeview's instructional practices revealed that the reporting personnel made common practice of using independent work, one on one support from paraprofessionals, team teaching, cooperative peer groups, and large group instruction to meet the various learning needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Of equal importance, they noted the integral results of typical peers supporting students with intellectual disabilities within the classroom settings. As noted by the review of the findings, when staff was unable to help a student regulate in the classroom, peers took the helm and resolved the issue.

The final component of Ridgeview's success with inclusion was collaboration. Olson et al. (2016) highlight that collaboration was done from various levels of the school's structure and hierarchy. Administrators, educators, paraprofessionals, and special educators all played a role in determining how to provide equitable access to all students. Most compelling was that the intricate and multi-dimensional definitions of true curriculum access are implemented by educational professionals at all levels of a school

culture. As recognized by Olson et al. (2016), it is the “shared responsibility” of educational access that has generated Ridgeview’s success with inclusion. Moreover, the efforts and success of Ridgeview serve as a benchmark for schools and districts which place a high value on equitable and inclusive curricula access for individuals with disabilities.

Inclusion and Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

As noted by Lowrey, Hollingshead, Howery, and Bishop (2017), Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an instructional framework that highlights the variables learners may face when attempting to access and unlock learning potential from the curricula. Furthermore, UDL removes the barriers within the curricula that limits some students from fully participating in learning modalities. Lowrey et al. (2017) note that efficacy studies of UDL have generated benefits to learners in areas of teacher effectiveness, student engagement, and a reduction of challenging behavior when UDL serves as the framework for instruction. Additionally, Lowrey et al. (2017) notes that this increase of student engagement and access should therefore be appropriate for meeting the needs and educational supports of individuals with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Lowrey et al. (2017) sought to provide new insight and perspective into how general education teachers implement UDL in inclusive classrooms and to students with intellectual disabilities.

The study compiled the personal narratives of general education teachers from the United States and Canada through semi-structured interview questions. Participants were recruited through social media groups that focused on UDL, sending emails to colleagues to seek out potential participants, and through a distribution of fliers at professional

development venues. In order to be considered for the study, the participants had to be general education teachers, work in a district that implemented district wide UDL practices, participants had to be implementing UDL design for at least one year, and more specifically, they had to have had at least one student with an intellectual disability in their class. Of those recruited, seven women fit the criteria for the study. Using an analysis of narratives, Lowrey et al. (2017) determined that four themes had emerged from the stories and experiences of the seven participants: designing for learner variability, talking about inclusion, teaming fosters success, and differing descriptions of UDL.

Designing for learner variability was described by Lowrey et al. (2017) as intentional planning. Intentional planning was further defined as providing options and a plan to overcome learning barriers for all students. Overall, the teachers reviewed in the study noted that intentional lesson planning was always the goal regardless of the challenges these plans may pose. The teachers represented in the study also well-articulated the connection between inclusion and UDL via the needs of their diverse classrooms, their instructional design, and the means through which instruction was implemented. The stories and narratives of the teachers interviewed highlighted how UDL and inclusion can foster new ways of learning, peer support, and engagement for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Lowrey et al. (2017) note that all participants stated in some manner or fashion that students with intellectual disabilities have a place in classrooms in which learner variability (the primary tenant of UDL) is practiced. However, as noted by Lowrey et al. (2017) specific strategies, relevant experience

instructing individuals with intellectual disabilities, and exemplars remain barriers in a system like UDL that is intended to be without barriers.

Students with Intellectual Disabilities in Global Communities

Globally, experts in education have begun to adopt practices that include students with intellectual disabilities in general education settings. Much like the proponents of inclusion in U.S. schools, schools across the globe are questioning, evaluating and researching the best practice solutions to provide an enriching and effective educational experience to children with intellectual disabilities. Studies conducted in Switzerland and Ireland sought to examine the effectiveness, accessibility, and practicality of educating students with intellectual disabilities in general education settings using inclusive models (Sermier Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Watson, 2009).

Sermier Dessemontet et al. (2012) conducted a comparative study of 68 Swiss children with intellectual disabilities. The participants ranged in age from 7-8 years old, and had an average IQ of 62.1. The purpose of the study was to determine the differences in academic achievement and adaptive behaviors of students with intellectual disabilities who were offered instruction in a general education setting or special schools. Special schools were defined as academic centers with teachers and staff specifically trained to instruct individuals with intellectual disabilities. Families and teachers were provided with the ABAS-II (Adaptive Behavior Assessment System, second addition). Additionally, families of participants completed a survey about their educational and occupational information. Data from the ABAS-II and the surveys was evaluated using the SPSS 16. Additionally, ANOVAS for repeated measures was conducted over the two years of the study to determine any differences in academic achievement and adaptive

behaviors. The results from the study concluded that there was a slight, but notable difference in the literacy achievements for students in inclusive classroom settings.

Additionally, the study found there was no change to the students' adaptive behaviors within the school settings, regardless of where they received academic instruction. However, the study acknowledged that independent from the classroom settings, students displayed growth in their adaptive behaviors following their two years of post-follow-up.

In an examination conducted by Watson (2009) reviewing the access to inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities, found that parents, advocates, and individuals with disabilities lack the resources to feel comfortable with obtaining access to their local schools. According to Watson (2009), the policies of United Nations, European Union, and the Irish Nation State have opened access for students with intellectual disabilities, however there are significant barriers at various levels of the educational system that attribute to an individual's *habitus*, or one's personal perception within a social structure. In three discreet phases, from November 2003 to December 2005, the perceptions of principals, a survey from parents of individuals with developmental disabilities, and a review of the funding in place to support placements for individuals with disabilities was conducted. Following the results of Watson's (2009) examination, it was determined that discriminatory enrollment practices remain an experience for individuals with intellectual disabilities when seeking academic placement in their local, government funded schools. Watson (2009) notes that the shift from segregated classrooms to mainstream settings requires a systematic shift from a disability service to an educational service. In whole, Watson evaluated the larger system and capital (monetary) outputs needed in order to

elevate an individual's habitus at the micro level when attempting to seek education in local schools. Watson (2009) concluded that system change requires the individuals within the structures willingness and commitment to allow access to effective mainstream education. Additionally, Watson (2009) expressed the gains in "cultural capital" these constructs would provide to the entire macrosystem.

Social and Academic Impact of Inclusion

Including students within the general education settings requires understanding the needs of all children. A typical general education setting is going to include children of all academic levels at varying levels of intelligence. What is the impact and attitude of these children when they are educated along with students with intellectual disabilities? According to Siperstein, Parker, Bardon, and Widaman (2007), inclusive practices have not always generated the most positive results in typical student attitudes. Siperstein et al. (2007) developed a research plan to determine if a student's perception of competence impacts their perception of inclusion with children with intellectual disabilities. Furthermore, how do these attitudes translate to a willingness to befriend or support a peer with intellectual disabilities. The study surveyed a random sample of middle school students regarding their attitudes towards the inclusion of peers with intellectual disabilities. The study collected data related to perceptions of students with intellectual disabilities, positive and negative beliefs related to inclusion, and willingness to engage and interact with students with intellectual disabilities. Overall, Siperstein et al. (2007) concluded that over half of the students surveyed are willing to engage with children with intellectual disabilities in simple pleasantries (saying "hello," helping with a small task) but do not believe their peers with intellectual disabilities are capable of higher level

academic tasks, such as language arts or mathematics. Siperstein et al. (2007) noted that if students felt that their intellectually disabled peers were more competent than others, then they held less negative attitudes regarding that student's academic instruction in the general education classroom.

In the study conducted by Nowicki and Sandieson (2002), the anticipated benefits of placing children with intellectual or physical disabilities in general education has not necessarily delivered the positive results hoped for. Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) examined children's attitudes towards individuals with disabilities by conducting a meta-analysis of studies from 1990-2000. Using three methods (weighted means, unweighted means, and vote counting), the attitudes were classified into attitude measurements. After reviewing 20 studies, each with a relative sample size of 112 individuals, Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) reviewed the data available regarding attitudes, age, disability type, and gender of the target populations. Of the studies reviewed, Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) concluded that girls were (in general) more accepting of individuals with disabilities, but only if the target was the same age. Additionally, they were able to infer from the data that children prefer or are more comfortable engaging with persons with physical disabilities than with those with an intellectual disability. In terms of an inclusive classroom environment, children may hold negative biases towards any student with an intellectual or physical disability (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002). The review by Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) charges educators to use the aforementioned bias to foster successful and supportive inclusion classrooms. In general, the attitudes of children towards those with intellectual or other disability status is in need of reform. The review underscores the possibility that educators are working to create positive and inclusive

classrooms retroactively to combat already occurring negative or passive attitudes (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002).

Using the Attitudes Toward Disabled Persons Form-Scale (ATDP), children of high and average achieving academic abilities were assessed regarding their attitudes toward students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Litvack, Ritchie, & Shore, 2011). Litvack et al. (2011) used the ATDP to determine current attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities and interviews were conducted of the 60 students participating. Litvack et al. (2011) determined that 10 of the 60 student participants were unaware of having a classmate with an intellectual disability, additionally, one third of the average achieving participants indicated that they had little to no interaction with their intellectually disabled classmates. Accordingly, a latent or limited interaction relationship was the most commonly reported relationship for both high achieving or average achieving students in inclusive classrooms. So how do these passive and negative attitudes effect the educational progress and self-concept of individuals with disabilities participating in inclusive classroom settings?

Individuals with intellectual disabilities are commonly described as having to overcome behavioral and adaptive challenges on a regular basis (Hall & Theron, 2016). Citing the cognitive differences in students with intellectual disabilities, Hall and Theron (2016) note that students with intellectual disabilities can experience recurring school failure and poor academic performance, leading to poor self-image or self-worth. Similarly, because students with intellectual disability are often designated as vulnerable in the various settings (these settings are referenced as “ecologies”) in which they live, there is an urgency in understanding how to generate resiliency and develop confidence

for individuals with intellectual disabilities in inclusive schools and classrooms (Hall & Theron, 2016). They developed a case study of 24 young adults with intellectual disabilities, ranging in age from 12-19, with the purpose of understanding what factors and supports facilitate pro-social behaviors, resiliency, and access to appropriate resources. With sensitivity to the limited literacy and verbal skills of some individuals with intellectual disabilities, they employed a method of using a hand-drawn picture representation of “what has helped you in life” (Hall & Theron, 2016, p.3). Participants described their perceived supports and resilience through drawing and the opportunity to describe their drawing verbally. Additionally, they interviewed the students’ teachers with an open-ended questionnaire regarding the risks associated with the participating students and how these students cope with these risks. They noted four themes that were derived from the information gathered in the case study. Each of the four themes serves as a call to action for schools and systems globally seeking a means to support the self-concept and resiliency of individuals with intellectual disabilities. The four themes include: providing differentiated academic and learning supports, offering safe spaces for students with intellectual disabilities to confide and learn, foster constructive peer connections, and the availability of developmentally appropriate activities. Overall, the study cited that meaningful, intentional and the “ordinary magic” of investing in the educational experiences of individuals with intellectual disabilities as the catalyst for functional and resilient attitudes of the participants (Hall & Theron, 2016, p.8). They discerned that a safe space to participate in commensurate and pleasurable sporting activities led to stronger peer attachments and the development of functional life skills. Additionally, they noted that two of the participants specifically communicated their

involvement in extra-curricular sporting activities as the means through which they have generated confidence and personal value. As noted by “Natalie” a study participant, “When I swim against other children [from SPSID] I always come first, then I feel good about myself” (Hall & Theron, 2016, p.6). As referenced by Hall and Theron (2016) previously, the “ordinary magic” of peer relationships, appropriate learning contexts, and connection to a team or event can serve as a foundation for resilience in individuals with intellectual disabilities (p.8).

Many individuals with disabilities have been participating in Special Olympics sanctioned activities over the course of the organizations 50-year tenure. Consistent with the findings of research that supports the need to help typical peers and individuals with intellectual disabilities to build meaningful relationships, Special Olympics has created a Unified Sports program. Briere and Siegle, (2008) share their synthesis of the seven paramount goals of unified sports:

- Bring together athletes with and without mental retardation in a setting where all athletes are challenged to improve skills.
- Provide valuable sports opportunities to individuals with mental retardation who are not presently involved in Special Olympics, especially those with mild retardation and those in communities where there are not enough athletes to conduct team sports.
- Prepare athletes with higher-level skills for participation in school or community sports.
- Increase public awareness of the spirit and skills of individuals with mental retardation .

- Enable Special Olympics athletes' siblings to participate as team members and coaches on Unified Sports teams.
- Enable athletes to develop friendships and understanding of each other's capabilities through a spirit of equality and team unity.
- Enhance each athlete's self-esteem.

Using the hallmarks of the Unified Program as a catalyst, Briere and Siegle (2008) reviewed the effects of a Unified Sports basketball program on the self-concept of four special education students was conducted. The findings suggested that all of the student participants recognized an increased sense of socialization on a regular basis. Similarly, all of the participants noted a strengthening of their social self-concept due to their admirable participation in the Unified Sports program. The results for physical self-concept were varied, noting that students perhaps recognized an increase in strength, but also an acknowledgement of some skill deficits when participating with non-disabled peers. According to the summary of findings, the student's global self-concept saw little to no increase. Extra-curricular involvement for students with disabilities is an area of inclusion that is still in its developing stages. Much of the research surrounding the attitudes of peers towards students with intellectual disabilities focuses on classroom inclusion and the regular education setting. The Unified Sports program, developed by Special Olympics, seeks to generalize inclusion to all areas of a student's educational experience-including extracurricular involvement.

In an effort to emphasize the social, physical, and global self-concept impact participating in a program like Unified Sports has on individuals with intellectual disabilities, the study conducted surveys and interviews with four athletes. The study

participants were comprised of three female and one male high school student all participating on a basketball unified sports team. The surveys and interviews sought to determine an increase in self-concept simply because the structure of the program (disabled and non-disabled students participating together) was structured to enhance each athlete's self-esteem.

The results of the surveys and one on one interviews determined that the individual participants felt an increase in their self-concept on a social scale with significance. They reported more confidence in their social interactions, peer connections, and sense of belonging within their school. In contrast, the findings reported that there was less of a positive increase in physical self-concept. Students reported that they may have generated more skills, but they also made some realizations about their skill deficits (Briere & Siegle, 2008). Finally, the global self-concept impact was reported mostly to be unchanged, but more or less due to the fact that the initial global self-concept reports were already high. Overall, the more casual and intimate discussion with the Unified Sport athletes further highlights the importance of inclusive activities outside of the classroom.

Effective Inclusion in Extracurricular Activities and Adaptive Sports

These inclusive practices in the classroom have translated to integrated organized sports outside of the classroom (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Comparatively, the Special Olympics program has sought to continue to champion inclusion by creating unified sports programs that combine individuals with intellectual disabilities with individuals without disabilities.

In order to determine if students held positive attitudes towards students with intellectual disabilities in the capacity of participating and associating with them in an adaptive sport, a study was conducted with 170 students in Auckland, New Zealand. Four schools were selected based on representation in varying socioeconomic categories. Two secondary and two primary schools participated in the study. Students were provided a questionnaire with 14 items using a 6-point Likert response scale. Participants answered 9 out of the 14 questions in this manner. The remaining five questions were open-ended and were analyzed into the resulting data. From the 170 student participants 10 participated in a focus group which was transcribed and categorized with the data collected from the questionnaire of the study.

The data revealed that the majority of students held positive attitudes towards participating in inclusive sports with students with intellectual disabilities. The positive result was consistent to the other findings in New Zealand studies, but in contrast to studies completed in the U.S. and other nations (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Of the data collected, it was noted that female, primary aged students held the most positive attitudes towards participation and association with peers with an intellectual disability. Researchers recognized that “there is a need both locally and internationally, to understand the gender differences in the willingness to participate in sports alongside children with intellectual disabilities” (Townsend & Hassall, 2007, p.7). Researchers cautioned educators and schools to recognize that the eagerness and tenacity of students willing to participate in inclusive sports will need to be shared by mainstream teachers, coaches, and supporters of unified sports in order to sustain some success.

Shalev, Asmus, Carter, and Moss (2016) examined the social perceptions of high school students towards their classmates with intellectual disabilities. The study concluded that peers who have had direct coaching on how to successfully interact with students with intellectual disabilities under the guidance of school staff have the potential to view their intellectually disabled peers more positively, become stronger advocates, and to develop meaningful relationships (Shalev et al., 2016).

CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

Taheri, Perry, and Minnes (2016) cite the World Health Organization's definition of disability to include participation restrictions. These restrictions are described as issues with an individual's involvement in general life situations. For individuals with intellectual disabilities, participation and involvement could be associated with playing on sports teams or even attending social events with friends. Universally, inclusion is the widely accepted notion that individuals with intellectual or other cognitive disabilities will have full access to the learning and social communities of their typical peers (Ballard & Dymond 2017; Georgiadi et al., 2012; Olson et al., 2016; Shalev et al., 2016; Siperstein et al., 2007). Since the passage of FAPE and IDEA, decades of research based interventions have been studied and reviewed, including reviews of inclusive practices in schools and learning communities around the world. It is widely accepted by champions of inclusion that including students with disabilities in general education classrooms and social activities would break down social barriers, negative attitudes, and increase the social acceptance of individuals with disabilities (Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002).

Including individuals with intellectual and physical disabilities in the general education setting over the last three decades has not necessarily generated the positive results as expected. Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) cite that there remains a lack of solid empirical evidence to support the social acceptance and increased self-perception of individual with disabilities. Prior to the implementation of FAPE and IDEA in U.S. schools, students with intellectual disabilities and/or physical disabilities received their education in separate schools or classroom structures void of typical functioning peers. Comparatively, the global community continues to develop similar frameworks, policies,

and legislations to include children with intellectual disabilities in the general education setting (Hall & Theron, 2016; Sermier Dessemontet et al., 2012; Watson, 2009) Today, the least restrictive environment of special education for children with intellectual disabilities exposes all children to the same curricula. This concept continues to grow internationally, as schools and communities continue to adopt more inclusive educational practices. According to Sermier Dessemontet et al. (2012), the amount of research devoted to effective inclusive practices for individuals with learning disabilities is plentiful, yet, the research related to effective inclusion for individuals with intellectual disabilities is sparse.

Following the passage of IDEA and the movement towards educating students with intellectual disabilities in the least restrictive environment, research studies suggested that American children consistently held negative attitudes towards their intellectually disabled peers (Siperstein et al., 2007). Of the many suggestions to remedy this social construct has been to include students with intellectual disabilities in cooperative activities with typical functioning peers (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). As highlighted by Watson (2009), shifting the perception away from schools as providing a disability service opens honest conversation about schools being a place to provide education services to individuals with disabilities. In other words, schools should at the core, be a place where quality education remains paramount. As schools around the globe grapple with legislation and local policies that place students with various, layered, and multifaceted needs in classrooms, there remains the questions of best practices to ensure inclusion and quality educational experiences (Hall & Theron, 2016; Watson, 2009).

In an effort to give educators and school professionals the framework and ground-level tools to make inclusion a reality, Olson et al. (2016), reviewed the impact of integrated comprehensive services (ICS) at a midwestern middle school. This service model eliminated special education pull-out instruction and resource models; instead, children of all functioning levels were educated in the same classrooms regardless of functional ability, intelligence, or disability. Olson et al. (2016) found that staff could look beyond the scope of differentiation and move towards authentic learning, goal achievement, and academic gains. Olson et al. (2016), concluded that inclusion done effectively, passionately, and intentionally opens academic and social opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities that may not be available in more traditional special education pull-out or resource models.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) has been a differentiation model used by educators for decades. Lowrey et al. (2017) defined UDL as instructional design meant to address learner variability by removing the barriers in the curriculum. UDL has been cited in legislative acts as valid framework and model for instructional design. By increasing the accessibility to the curriculum, it is generally accepted that UDL also allows students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to access the curricula effectively. Additionally, UDL is touted as a means to move educational practices away from goals related to generalization and socialization in the general education setting to authentic learning and experiences for students with intellectual disabilities (Ballard & Dymond, 2017; Lowrey et al., 2017). Using models like UDL and ICS to provide educational services to individuals with intellectual disabilities further provides meaningful and valuable opportunities for the school culture to embrace and celebrate the

learning diversity of students. It also opens the discussion on the impact these practices have on the self-concepts of students with intellectual disabilities.

Nowicki and Sandieson (2002) and Siperstein et al. (2007) conclude that educating students with intellectual disabilities within the general education setting has a lasting impact. However, that impact is not necessarily in a positive manner as hoped by champions of inclusion. Typically, general education students report positive interactions with students with intellectual disabilities. Yet, these interactions are limited to assistance with small tasks, a greeting, or feeling comfortable with the student being a part of the classroom setting. Litvack et al. (2011) reference these interactions as passive or limited to only recognizing the basic skill sets of individuals with intellectual disabilities by their typical peers. There remain questions about how typical peers generalize these soft social skills and understanding of individuals with intellectual disabilities outside of the classroom. In other words, how do typical students and individuals with intellectual disabilities merge the gap between acquaintances and meaningful and/or reciprocal connection?

One answer to this need is the development of adaptive sports and the Special Olympics Unified Sports program. Adaptive sports are designed to offer developmentally appropriate sporting activities for individuals with disabilities, providing them an opportunity to compete, participate, and feel success with similar peers (Hall & Theron, 2016). Additionally, as cited by Briere and Siegle (2008), the Special Olympics Unified Sports program seeks meet a variety of student needs and interests by combining individuals with disabilities with typical peers to perform on a team together. Unified and adaptive sports seek to offer individuals and their typical peers the opportunity to develop

a stronger physical, social, and even global self-concept. Watson (2009), refers to this as their “*habitus*,” or an individual’s understanding of their place in social constructs.

Moreover, educators and adults who authentically and genuinely place an emphasis on developing the relationship and connections for students with intellectual disabilities and their typical peers see more positive self-concepts for all students (Briere & Siegle, 2008; Hall & Theron, 2016; Olson et al., 2016; Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Siperstein et al. (2007), concludes that is not contact and exposure that generate positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities; rather it is meaningful opportunities to see the competence and performance of students with intellectual disabilities that leads to more positive attitudes overall.

Limitations of the Research

The list of resources was narrowed by only reviewing peer-reviewed journals that capitalized on the effectiveness of inclusion in the general education setting, both curricular and extra-curricular. The key words used in these searches were “individuals with intellectual disabilities,” “effective inclusive practices,” “impact of inclusion on individuals with intellectual disabilities,” “inclusion practices and intellectual disabilities,” and “unified sports and individuals with intellectual disabilities.” Additionally, searches related to the impact of inclusion on typical functioning students were conducted to provide insight and reference into the experience of an entire school community. In some cases, the study samples were small or the research parameters were not as in-depth or as specific as perhaps required to make sound assertions regarding the impact of inclusion on individuals with intellectual disabilities. The challenge was finding meaningful research related to extra-curricular or activities outside of the

classroom that provided information about the feelings and value of these experiences for individuals with intellectual disabilities. It is difficult to discern if the positive results of the various studies would directly translate to the values and sportsmanship required to participate in a unified sports program. There is no real estimation of “quality contact,” a time estimation, or the context through which individuals develop a consistent positive attitude towards individuals with intellectual disabilities. While there were various studies about inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in the general education setting, there was limited information available regarding extra-curricular activities and/or adaptive programs that would be accessible for all. Additionally, questions remain regarding how to accurately and respectfully measure the narrative and experience of an individual with an intellectual disability simply because of the biological and cognitive implications present.

Implications for Future Research

As noted by Siperstein et al. (2007), youth understand the moral and societal message of acceptance that is associated with accepting individuals with disabilities in their lives. While there was a presence of apathy in some of the data provided by the various studies within, there was sense of urgency and tenacity present by educators, typical peers, and parents who desired the best quality of life for their friends, children, and students with intellectual disabilities. The question remains as to what that quality of life looks like. Is it developed through appropriate and effective inclusion practices? Or is it meaningful exposure to typical peers and developmental norms that provide individuals with intellectual disabilities the desired level of quality of life? Given the nature of an intellectual disability, it would be helpful to develop a measurement tool that effectively

presents an individual's experience and reflection on their self-concept. Additionally, research and longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of adaptive sporting activities versus programs like the Special Olympics Unified Program. Which tends to lend itself to more positive attitudes and outcomes for individuals with disabilities? Is it access to their typical peers or is it programs specifically designed for one group of individuals?

Implications for Professional Application

As a special educator for individuals with intellectual disabilities, providing meaningful, functional, and appropriate academic and social interactions within the confines of my classroom is a driving force to my school day. I am in the unique position to see the real and raw attributes that make my students who they are. I have the unique capacity to watch them grow academically and socially every day. However, this connection and understanding comes with the nature of my role as special educator in a unique and specific educational program. While I take my role as special educator very seriously, there remains a gap in how to effectively provide my students with meaningful academic growth and investment in the general education setting. This investment is not only important for their academic and functional development, but perhaps more importantly, for their social development.

The inclusive nature of UDL and whole school approach of frameworks like ICS, offer students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to be a part of the educational practices of their peers. Like the motivators of FAPE and IDEA, these practices are exemplars of the least restrictive environment in which to develop the whole student, regardless of disability. The success of these programs lies in the collaboration and efforts of the entire school-general and special educators alike. As referenced in many of

the studies herein, the purpose of inclusion is met when educators can coach and facilitate connection and relationship between all students and staff. It takes the efforts of everyone to see the potential and ignite the spirit of acceptance by modeling, coaching, and compassion. Educators would be wise to continue to collaborate on how to present the curricula to all students, either through UDL or through a model like ICS, which allows full access to the curricula without specialized classes. As educators, devaluing the impact that inclusion can have on our school cultures continues to breed fear, misunderstanding, and missed opportunities to see the raw and real individuals who share our hallways.

As previously noted, when inclusion is done effectively, the social impact on student's personal self-concept is noted as more positive. The confidence gained by students with intellectual disabilities is priceless. Similarly, inclusion allows typical students to develop appropriate connections, understanding, and align themselves with students who have different educational needs. Additionally, capitalizing on the tenacity and excitement built in the classroom to after school activities and programs like the Special Olympics Unified Sports program would allow educators, students, and community members the opportunity to see the critical importance of inclusion. The continued hope is that giving meaningful inclusion opportunities to all students will breed more generations of inclusive homes, businesses, and communities.

Conclusion

The idea that UDL, ICS, Special Olympics, Special Olympics Unified Sports, or adaptive activities are the single answer to FAPE and IDEA's demand of the least restrictive environment is overly simplistic. There is not a single barometer available to gauge the

attitudes, gains, or progress of inclusion in classrooms and playing fields across the globe. The subjectively and uniqueness of individual feelings, experiences and attitudes is too difficult to explicitly measure. Yet, it remains to be seen (or measured) how these methods have brought any notable harm or disfunction to our schools, homes, and communities. It remains the continued hope of educators, parents, advocates, and individuals with disabilities, that the time will come when our social constructs place a higher value on personal relationships rather than on categories and labels.

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