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BENEFITS, BARRIERS, AND SUPPORTS IN SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH  
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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

BY  
STEPHANIE O'NEAL SAUER

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF ARTS IN EDUCATION  
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BETHEL UNIVERSITY

BENEFITS, BARRIERS, AND SUPPORTS IN SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH  
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

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December 2022

APPROVED

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## Acknowledgements

In 2018, I showed up at an old elementary school to substitute “the littles”. Once there, I realized that it was a transitional center for students ages 18-21 with disabilities. For most of my life, I had avoided this specific population due to my discomfort that was caused by the lack of knowledge about disabilities and the amazing personalities of those with disabilities.

By the end of the day, I was hooked. A few months later, I applied to Bethel University to earn my Master of Arts in Special Education. For the next two years, I was the regular substitute teacher in that building and developed incredible relationships with this often marginalized population. In September 2020, I began to teach in my own classroom and could not imagine doing anything else at this point in my life.

First, I want to thank Steven, for without your encouragement to push myself to earn my teaching license in addition to the Master’s degree, I would not be where I am today. I also want to thank Ashley and Mark because for the last 3 years of your high school lives, Mom worked almost full time and then spent her evenings writing papers! You were somewhat neglected, but I know you understand. Kiddos, I’m proof that it’s never too late to follow your dreams. And to the teachers and staff at OSTC - your acceptance and mentoring while I was in your building pushed me to complete this journey. So thank you! And lastly, to my God for showing me this path, because He LITERALLY had to trick me to get into the building that first day - and it worked!

### Abstract

This literature review examines the benefits of inclusion in sports and activities for those with intellectual disabilities, the barriers that exist that inhibit or prohibit the inclusion, and the supports that can be implemented to establish an inclusive environment for students with disabilities and their families. The author analyzed the results of studies that focused on the experiences of students with intellectual disabilities between the ages of 14 and 21 with publication years between 2010 to 2022. The results show the social and self-perception benefits of inclusion, the material, community, and emotional barriers to participation, and key supports that have been shown to create inclusive environments for those with intellectual disabilities.

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## **CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Historical Context & Definitions of Terms**

According to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities must be provided a free appropriate public education that is as adequate as the education provided for students who are not disabled. Section 504 not only establishes the legal right for free appropriate education, but it also establishes the right for students with disabilities to participate in nonacademic extracurricular activities that are provided at their school. The activities may include, but are not limited to, recreational athletics and activities, special interest groups or clubs that are sponsored by the school, and transportation.

Academic pursuit and achievement are important to the cognitive development of those with disabilities and participation and extracurricular activities help them build connections with others, broaden their self-perception, and increase their confidence. Not only does participation in extracurricular activities have positive impacts on those with disabilities, it also increases the exposure of those with disabilities to those without disabilities, changing the perceptions of the community at large about the abilities and worthiness of the disabled community. Students with intellectual disabilities, those with cognitive limitations that affect a person's ability to learn and function at the same level as their same-aged peers, deserve the right to be full participants, or citizens, within their secondary school (ages 14-21), or high school (grades 9 - 12+) settings.



Meaningful participation of those with intellectual disabilities can shift community attitudes. Athletes with disabilities go from feeling like they are “pushed to leave a sports team” because their involvement brings “down the level of the team” (Cologon, 2022, p. 406) to an environment of inclusion where those without disabilities believe there is no difference between the involvement of those with and without disabilities (McConkey et al., 2019; McConkey et al., 2013) and begin to see those with disabilities as “full-fledged athletes” (Roult et al., 2015, p. 11).

Through unified sports and programs that foster equal opportunity and participation to those with disabilities and those without, students with intellectual disabilities can become part of an inclusive society that celebrates full citizenship within their school communities. Merriam Webster defines “citizenship” as “membership in a community” and “the quality of an individual's response to membership in a community.” Darcy and Dowse (2013) go a step further and reference disability citizenship where those with disabilities are given the opportunity for sustainable and meaningful employment, development of life skills, and full participation in community activities to develop skills and social connections. Through inclusive sports and activities, those with disabilities experience a sense of belonging within a community that extends beyond themselves as individuals and includes their families.

Inclusive participation also fosters the second part of Merriam Webster’s definition of citizenship regarding the quality of an individual’s response to citizenship. Through participation, those with intellectual disabilities begin to feel a sense of

achievement, pride, and experience a great feeling when they win a game (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). They begin to establish deeper relationships with their peers not only through shared experiences in these activities but through the 1:1 support they have from their peers to help them navigate the sport or activity. Within the classroom, students with disabilities are observed to be either actively or passively engaged in content more often (Toews et al., 2020) when they have peer support.

Societal perceptions, availability of equipment, human and material supports, and opportunity, as well as the lack of desire or open hostility towards participation in activities with those with disabilities, are all “powerful disincentives to participation” (Darcy & Dowse, 2013, p. 401). Based on the results of the study by Siperstein et al. (2017), extracurricular activities are a way to bring those with disabilities and those without disabilities together and to begin the realization of full citizenship for the disabled community by examining the benefits of, barriers to, and supports available that can help to bridge the gap between exclusion and inclusion.

### **Research Questions**

Through this literature review, the author sought to provide information on the benefits to those with and without intellectual disabilities of participation in sports and activities. Because participation is limited, the author researched the barriers that inhibit or prohibit the inclusion of those with disabilities. Finally, to help eliminate those barriers, what are specific supports that can be provided to those with intellectual

disabilities in sports and activities to increase the full participation of those with disabilities?

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Literature Search Procedures

The author of this literature review searched Education Journals, ERIC, and EBSCO MegaFILE databases. Initially, the search was narrowed to peer-reviewed and published empirical studies from 2015 to 2022. When the same materials began to surface in multiple research studies, the author expanded the search to include materials published from 2010 to 2022 with an occasional search prior to 2010 depending on the relevance of the information. The search was narrowed by focusing on studies that explored the experiences of students primarily between the ages of 14 and 21 who have been categorized as Intellectually Disabled and included students receiving services for Autism Spectrum Disorder. The key words used in the research include “special education,” “intellectual disability,” “secondary school setting,” “unified sports,” “unified programs,” “inclusion,” “high school,” “peer support,” “severe disability,” “academic inclusion,” “extracurricular activities,” and “social emotional”. The structure of this chapter is to review the literature on unification and inclusion in three sections in this order: The Benefits of Unified Sports and Activities, The Barriers to Unified Sports and Activities, and The Supports for Unified Sports and Activities.

### **Benefits, Barriers, and Support in Sports and Activities for Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities**

The National Center for Education Statistics (2022) reports that for the 2020-2021 school year, the number of students receiving special education services was

15% of total public school enrollment or about 7.2 million students. Of those students receiving special education services, 6%, or 432,000 students, were receiving services under the disability category of Intellectual Disability. While 88% of the students with disabilities in the public school system who spent more than 80% of their day in general education classrooms were students with speech and language impairments, less than 19% of students with intellectual disabilities spent 80% or more of their school day in general education classrooms. Pence and Dymond (2015) state that students with disabilities have significantly lower levels of participation in school activities and clubs (including sports) than all other students.

The Department of Education and Skills (2001) stated that inclusion is “about engendering a sense of community and belonging” (p. 3) and, while social inclusion can be subjective due to the different needs and wants of different people, Cobigo et al. (2016) state that fulfilling relationships, including friends and even casual interactions, helped persons with intellectual disabilities feel included when they were acknowledged by people. From two online studies with a total of 65 participants that included social inclusion researchers, persons with intellectual disabilities, service providers/managers, and family members of those with ID, Cobigo et al. (2016) also found that the respondents felt they were socially included when they experienced recognition from others, were accepted as individuals, had personal relationships that were reciprocal, and belonged to a group. In their literature review of 40 articles with keywords “sense of belonging” as the main search criteria, Mahar et al. (2013) define belonging to include

value and respect from a relationship where they experienced common beliefs or personal characteristics (p. 1031). Simpican et al. (2015) conducted a literature survey of articles written over a 10 year period that contained definitions of social inclusion and similarly concluded that two components of social inclusion include interpersonal relationships and community participation.

When only 19% of students with an intellectual disability spend more than 80% of their day in general education classrooms, there is little opportunity for those students to build relationships and experience the sense of belonging that comes with social and academic inclusion. Siperstein et al. (2017), in their study of survey results from 2,800 students in 11 high schools that had implemented the Unified Champion Schools program for three or more years, state that in order for high schools to be socially inclusive of all, students with ID (intellectual disability) should have equal access to the full range of school experiences, including clubs, sports, and leadership opportunities.

This literature review highlights the benefits, barriers, and supports that schools and communities can use to provide inclusion opportunities in sports and activities for students with intellectual disabilities.

Unified sports and activities bring together those with disabilities and those without to participate in a partnership in sports and activities. Unified sports can be offered through organized community or school teams and leagues or be offered as courses to earn credit during the school day. Unified activities operate the same way,

either through community organizations or within the school system itself. This section of the literature review will look at the benefits of unified sports and activities for those with intellectual disabilities, the barriers to their participation, and strategies to break down those barriers to create opportunities for unification and inclusion.

### **Benefits of Inclusion for Athletes with Intellectual Disabilities and Their Families**

From the results of their study of 37 Special Olympics athletes and 41 of their partners, Bota et al. (2017), found that for all children and adolescents, participation in sports and activities has benefits, including increased friendships/social connections, sense of belonging, and self perception and self esteem. However, children and adolescents with intellectual disabilities participate at a much lower rate than their typically developing peers. As students with intellectual disabilities became more competent in sports due to participation, they became more integrated into their school setting (Bota et al., 2017). As students with ID participate in activities outside of the classroom, their visibility within the school or community increases which also increases the opportunity for those without disabilities to interact with them.

**Friendships/Social Interactions.** As students with intellectual disabilities become more integrated into their school environment, there is an increase in their friendship base (Bota et al., 2017, Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Granddisson et al., 2012; Roullet et al., 2015). Bota et al. (2017) found that students with intellectual disabilities who participate in sports or activities spend more time with typically developed peers outside of those activities than they do with relationships they build during school hours. This suggests

that while friendships forged within the school building are important, they do not translate into relationships that are continued outside of school at the same rate as friendships that are cultivated in sports or activities.

Siperstein et al. (2019), in their analysis of 1,200 survey responses from students in 12 high schools in which half had implemented the Unified Champions Schools program and half had not, report that, before a particular program was implemented, almost all (95%) of typically developed students saw students with intellectual disabilities at school, yet only 32% reported to have any interaction with them beyond greeting them (p. 574). In addition, for the students with ID who participated in extracurricular activities, typically developed peers reported that they interacted in those activities with the students with ID only 15% of the time. After the implementation of unified programming which included unified sports, there was a significant increase in the frequency of social interactions between students with intellectual disabilities and those without (Siperstein et al., 2019). Unified programming does not only benefit those who are directly involved. Siperstein et al. (2019) reported improved perceptions of school inclusion from the students who did participate in the unified programming. In *The Special Olympics Unified Champions Schools Program: Year 8 Evaluation Report*, one sports participant stated that students at her school “come up to me and give me high fives, and they talk to me...sit with me at lunch...some of the popular kids will talk to me...about the games and stuff like that” (Jacobs et al., 2017, p. 54).



**Sense of belonging.** In addition to increased social interactions and friendships, students with intellectual disabilities report an increase in their sense of *belonging* to a community as a benefit of participating in unified sports and activities. In order to understand the meaning of social inclusion, McConkey et al. (2019) held interviews with 49 Special Olympics Unified Sports participants and 39 partners over a three month period and highlighted a core theme that inclusion equals *togetherness*. In their research, five sub themes emerged as the underlying pieces that create the feeling of togetherness: *equality, friendships, participation, connections, and assistance*. Each of the sub themes included a form of *belonging*.

*Equality*, as a form of belonging, was expressed as acceptance and one athlete/participant spoke of the fact that everyone, even those on other Unified teams, cheered for all the players (McConkey et al., 2019). Acceptance goes beyond just being present on a team that does not give the athletes with ID a chance at game play time, Darcy & Dowse (2013) found in the results of their analysis of 566 questionnaire responses from persons with Intellectual Disability. Grandisson et al. (2012) conducted a study to determine the factors that go into integrating sports teams with both adolescents with intellectual disability (ID) and those without. They conducted individual interviews with 40 individuals with intellectual disability and their parents along with discussion groups or self-administered questionnaires of 39 rehabilitation staff. Grandisson et al. (2012) found that acceptance, and thus belonging, means that the team, coaches, players, and other people involved will need to show acceptance of a

player beyond using the athlete as a “mascot” for the team (p. 224). In their interviews with 35 young people (ages 12-25 years old) with intellectual disabilities, their parents, and key support persons, Carroll et al. (2020) found that equality on the field can lead to unforeseen victories and potentially make history. This is the case with a mainstream rugby team when a player was the first athlete with disabilities to play on a master league team.

*Friendships*, as a form of belonging, means to be part of a gang or a family, and to “feel like you have known the people forever” (McConkey et al., 2019, p. 237). In their 15-month long study of 221 participants, comprised of 60% disabled athletes and 40% non-disabled partners, in five different countries in Europe, Wilski et al. (2012) researched the personal development of athletes and partners involved in unified sports and found that friendships are a major component in the decision about whether or not to participate in the unified program. One rugby player with disabilities shared about the family feeling that came with being a member of the team (Carroll et al., 2020). A non-disabled partner in the international study by Wilski et al. (2012) spoke of friendships between disabled and non-disabled athletes that continue off field stating that “we are friends both on and off the field” in regards to their relationship with the athlete with disabilities (p. 275).

*Participation*, as a form of belonging, is expressed by McConkey et al. (2019) as everyone being involved and joining in. Extracurricular activities are a part of everyday high school life which helps them feel connected, form friendships, and build skills that

benefit them for future endeavors. As noted by Siperstein et al. (2019), the “physical inclusion” of students with ID does not always “translate into social inclusion” (p. 577). Darcy and Dowse (2013) present evidence in their study that persons with intellectual disabilities just want to be given the chance to participate like their non-disabled peers and to be given a chance to play and participate. Siperstein et al. (2019) found that the participation of students with ID in a unified sports or unified club established social connections that were twice as frequent as for those who did not participate in either. The benefits are seen by more than just those with disabilities. One partner shared that in their experience, everyone on the team is included in game play (McConkey et al., 2019).

*Connections*, as a form of belonging, is stated specifically as belonging and sticking together as a team that includes more people than just the players. This is closely linked to the sub theme *Assistance*, which, as a form of belonging, means to be cared about and to have somewhere to go for problems (McConkey et al., 2019). McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, and Menke (2013) conducted about 40 individual and group interviews with athletes, partners, coaches, parents, and community leaders in five different European countries and from the results, found that the participants in the study refer to *connections/assistance* as “alliances” (p. 931). These alliances between the players and their families and coaches and community organizations create an opportunity to assist families with attendance, transportation, expenses, support, and in some cases, employment opportunities for the players. As one player put it, “She needs

help and she asked people to work at her house...she's getting support from friends."

And a partner noticed that members of the other team would help other players if they fell (McConkey et al., 2019, p. 238).

**Self perception and self esteem.** The concepts of self-esteem, self-perception, or self-concept are linked together. Webster's Dictionary (n.d.) defines self-esteem as having a confidence or satisfaction in one's self. Roberts (1993), in his article "The Importance of Self-Esteem in Children and Young People Separated from their Families", highlights Samuels' (1900) definition of self-concept as including the subconscious and conscious feelings about self. He goes on to say that we use the words good and bad to describe the value that we have placed on our bodies, our academic abilities, and how we relate with our friends and family. In addition, Roberts (1993) outlines a definition by Coopersmith (1967) who says that self-esteem emanates from one's own approval or disapproval of themselves and how each person believes him or herself to be "capable, significant, successful and worthy" (p. 48-49). Briere and Siegle (2008) conducted one-on-one interviews and administered pre- and post-surveys with four students with varying disabilities in a case study that highlighted their experiences with the Special Olympics Unified Sports Basketball program and found that individuals create their own self-concept through the way they negatively or positively view themselves in various areas of their lives.

As Coopersmith stated, self-esteem is tied to how a person believes him or herself to be capable and successful. Athletes experience the reality of increased

self-esteem and the changed perspectives of those around them. Wilski et al. (2012) show in their research that there was a positive change in the sports skills of both athletes and partners after participating in a unified sports program.

In order to learn the needs and expectations of adapted sporting events, Roullet et al. (2015) conducted 33 semi-structured interviews with those who organize adapted sporting events. They learned that change in skills not only enhances the self-esteem of the athletes with intellectual disability, but also changes the perception others have of them as they see that the athletes are “able to surpass and fulfill themselves” while also increasing “the pride of youth with disabilities” (p. 11). One partner shared that participating in Unified sports helped to develop more acceptance of diversity and the ability to look beyond the disability and see what they can do (McConkey et al., 2019). Carroll et al. (2020) speak of a wheelchair basketball team who held workshops for able-bodied peers who began to view the sport “in a more inclusive light” (p. 5). Bota et al. (2017) highlight that 89% of respondents in their survey stated feeling a higher self-esteem after participating in a unified sports program compared to 68% of respondents without participating. This research shows that as the athletes experience success in sports, their self-esteem increases as they view themselves, their skills, abilities, and worth from a more positive perspective.

### **Barriers to Participation in Unified Sports and Activities**

As the functional limitations of students with intellectual disabilities increases and becomes more diverse, adapting more activities to the needs of students becomes

more complex (Roult et al., 2015). Similarly, Darcy et al. (2017) found, from the results of their study of 1,046 questionnaires completed by persons with disabilities and their caretakers, that as the support needs of the individual increases, the level of barriers or constraints also increases. This contributes to the multiple factors that limit the availability of mainstream unified sports, which can cause disinterest and discouragement for those with disabilities (Carbone et al., 2021) and limit the participation of those with disabilities. These barriers can include "physical, social, and organizational environments" (Darcy & Dowse, 2013, p. 395). Within those barriers, as reported in "In Search of a Level Playing Field" by Darcy and Dowse (2013), families and participants expressed the need to have information accessible, personal and social support, and political allies who are committed to advancing opportunities for inclusion. Granddisson et al. (2012) show that, beyond the availability of adaptive equipment, parents and athletes with intellectual disabilities need practical support, information on available opportunities, and procedures (and the disability knowledge base of those building those procedures) in place to integrate the sport or activity.

**Transportation.** Transportation to and from events and practices and lack of facilities and adapted equipment are two physical barriers to participation. Agran et al. (2017) interviewed 146 special education teachers of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities from five states who stated that lack of transportation (along with opportunity, and student and parent interest) was a barrier to participation in school activities by their students with intellectual disabilities. Darcy and Dowse (2013);

Grandisson et al. (2012); Legg et al. (2022); and Roule et al. (2015) each state that transportation is a factor in the ability of a person with intellectual disability to participate in sports or extracurricular activities. Because of the need for specialized transportation, one participant shared that the need to plan transportation in advance is a big barrier to participation and area of concern (Roult et al., 2015). Transportation options are limited for those without a driver's license or often sporting facilities are not located on public transportation routes (Darcy & Dowes, 2013). Without reliable and consistent transportation, regular participation of those with intellectual disability can be limited.

**Access to facilities and equipment.** There is also a lack of appropriate facilities and equipment (Carbone et al., 2021; Legg et al.) for those with intellectual disability which can lead to a lack of opportunity to safely and equitably engage in the sports and activities. This encompasses both school and community facilities. Roult et al. (2015) reports that the layout of school buildings inhibits the physical participation of students in the buildings' indoor facilities because classrooms are in far and difficult to reach locations within the school buildings. They are accessible only through narrow corridors and multiple stairways which inhibits the movement of students and also reduces the amount of time the students can participate in game play. In addition, both school and community facilities do not contain appropriate areas for assisting athletes before and after activities, including changing areas that don't have the space for changing for students and athletes with disabilities (Darcy & Dowse, 2012; Legg et al., 2022; Rouhl et

al., 2015). In their research consisting of 69 interviews and surveys with participants, coaches, and administrators across five nations, Legg et al. (2022) found that sports fields and activity areas, spectator areas, and entrances to facilities were common deterrents to participation. Participants within the community also face a lack of facilities in their communities that accommodate unified sports and activities (Carbone et al., 2021; Darcy & Dowse, 2012), which eliminates the possibility of participation unless transportation options are available. Adaptive equipment creates financial difficulties for schools because technology is constantly advancing and older and less powerful equipment needs to be replaced. In addition, adaptive equipment deteriorates and needs to be replaced (Roult et al., 2015).

**Social and cultural constructs.** Access to unified sports is often limited not only due to the physical architecture of buildings, adapted equipment, or the logistics of transportation. Barriers also exist within the social and cultural constructs that not only limit or prohibit access to sports for those with intellectual disabilities but directly interfere with the full participation of athletes once they are on a team. In their research, Carroll et al. (2020) found that while the physical environment did create barriers, “ableist attitudes were the greatest constraints on participation” (p. 4). These barriers include the attitude of others and realistic support to the athlete and their families.

*Attitudes of others.* The attitudes of others, including teammates and coaches, have a negative impact on the participation in sports and other activities for students



with intellectual disabilities (Legg et al., 2022) because when human support is lacking, those who wanted to participate were unable to do so (Carroll et al., 2020). As one study participant stated, "...Don't say, 'oh you can't do this', because we have a disability; say, 'oh, we can find a way to do this'" (Carroll et al., 2020, p. 4). Players experience limitations in the available training time or game play time due to the placement on teams of younger athletes because of slower speed or less developed skills (Carroll et al., 2020; Darsy & Dowes, 2013). Or, as found by Carroll et al. (2020), many students were moved into occupational or physical therapy instead of being active in physical education classes or expected to participate at the level as those who are able-bodied. Roullet et al. (2015) write of teachers who keep students from competitions due to the fear of defeat or will not design lesson plans when they feel it is impossible because of the variety of limitations in their classes. There is also a lack of understanding from those who do not have a child with disabilities and athletes and families mention there is a fear of their players being bullied by other children (Darsy & Dowes, 2013). One participant in a study stated, "I have people complain about the behavior of my son, and try to chastise him and myself. I get to the point where I...just leave" (Darsy & Dowes, 2013, p. 401).

*Realistic supports.* Many families and athletes mention the lack of realistic supports as a contributing factor to not participating in sports or activities (Cartwright et al., 2016; Darcy & Dowes, 2013). As stated previously, as the amount of necessary support increased, so did the level of barriers the individual faced to participate (Darcy

et al., 2017). Barriers include the lack of support to access and participate in activities, to assist with transportation, and limited coaches and assistants who did not have the knowledge to effectively support athletes (Carbone et al., 2021; Darcy & Dowes, 2013; Darcy et al., 2017; Carbone et al., 2021). Legg et al. (2022) found that physical education teachers' lack of disability knowledge or lack of knowledge about sport opportunities to best suit the wants and needs of the student were barriers. Roullet et al. (2015) quoted a teacher who said that she had "no support whatsoever" (p. 7) and had to work outside of regular hours to provide an inclusive 1-day event for multiple schools. When this teacher solicited assistance from colleagues in the other schools, she received no assistance or interest in assisting. Darcy and Dowes (2013) found that participation hinges on the support. If support is not available, the athletes and families will not participate. Yet, according to Darcy et al. (2017), because the disability or the way each person is impaired is unique to the individual, specific supports need to be considered for each participant.

### **Strategies to Break Down Barriers and Create Opportunities for Inclusion and Unification in Sports and Activities**

While there are numerous barriers to creating equitable and abundant opportunities for individuals with intellectual disabilities to participate in sport and activities, solid strategies have been identified in research and literature to help break down those barriers to open up access to those who want to participate. In their article "Physical Activity and Youth with Disabilities: Barriers and Supports", Block et al. (2013)

identify a three pronged model when discussing supports for participants with disabilities: Support, Programming, and Training. Communities and schools can provide equal opportunity through structural and social/cultural supports such as the creation of appropriate facilities, equipment, and other material supports, the facilitation of change in the attitudes of others, and ensuring that realistic supports are available to those with disabilities who desire to participate in sport and activities with able-bodied peers. Darcy and Dowes (2013) state that there are “significant structural constraints, which combine with issues of inclusive practices, attitudes, and skills of service providers, that act as constraints to participation” (p. 404-405). Block et al. (2013) highlight that supports must work in tandem with each other and individually may not remove barriers to participation. This section of the literature review will look at different strategies that schools and communities can employ to provide more inclusive opportunities for those with intellectual disabilities who want to participate in sport and activities.

### **Material Supports**

Material supports for those with disabilities, including appropriate facilities, adaptive equipment, and transportation to and from facilities, are lacking for those with intellectual disabilities (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). Grandisson et al. (2012) report that the removal of architectural barriers help to provide universal access to all who wish to participate.

One such architectural barrier is the lack of adapted equipment available for those with disabilities. Grandisson et al. (2012) state that occupational therapists could

conduct an analysis of the environment and activities of the sport as well as an analysis of the functional abilities and capabilities of the participants with intellectual disability. These analyses would provide the information to both identify and supply the adapted equipment for the athletes (Grandisson et al., 2012). Schools can use bigger balls for some sports or lower nets for other sports (Roult et al., 2015) to facilitate access for players with disabilities. When necessary modifications are implemented that change the game or sport too much, Dieringer & Judge (2015) state that sports that were developed to create a safe and fun environment can be utilized for students with disabilities.

Access to sporting or community facilities limits the level of participation by those with intellectual and physical disabilities. As mentioned in the previous section, access to an appropriate changing room is a deterrent to participation so facilities should provide dressing rooms that make it easier for a person with disabilities to have assistance dressing and undressing (Rimmer et al., 2004). Rimmer et al. (2012) outlined, from the results of focus groups with people with disabilities, architects, fitness and recreation professionals, city planners, and park district managers conducted in ten United States regions from 2001 to 2002, facility upgrades that would benefit those with mobility and stability limitations outside of wheelchair use. These accessibility upgrades include installing mats that do not slip in locker rooms, push-button operated doors, and providing desks with writing areas for those in wheelchairs or for those who are unable to reach a higher countertop. The removal of barriers (such as thresholds) that make it

difficult or impossible for those with mobility limitations to cross would provide those accessing the facility with a more stable and safe environment. Access also includes providing information regarding accessible facilities and programs located within surrounding communities (Rimmer et al., 2004).

The location of facilities and the lack of reliable transportation interferes with full participation in sport and activities of those with disabilities. Roult et al. (2015) found that transportation that is accessible must be available and one way to provide that is to plan ahead as much as possible for activities. Since transportation is required by law for all students who participate in activities regardless of ability or disability, Dieringer and Judge (2015) write that applying for financial support through grants, scholarships, foundations, or advocating for funding through the school district are ways to help finance additional transportation costs.

### **Social/Cultural Supports**

The proper social and cultural supports help to facilitate the participation of those with intellectual disabilities within sport programs and activities. Outside of accessibility to the material supports, social and cultural supports are the key to participation (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). As stated by Darcy et al. (2017) the level of support an individual requires during activities is related to the level of support they need in everyday life. The level of support that is needed is based on the individual and not based on a one-size-fits-all approach. This section looks at the different opportunities that can be provided for individuals to meet their specific needs and abilities, training for

coaches and staff, and the availability of supports during activities for those with intellectual disability.

Since the needs of the individuals are so diverse due to the complexities of disability and how each individual's disability manifests itself, there is a need for different levels of opportunities. These program types include Mainstream (also called Inclusive), Semi-Specialized (also called Unified, or "Reverse Inclusion" (Block et al., 2013)), and Specialized. Grandisson et al. (2012) report that these opportunities are to be provided in line with the actual functional ability of the individual. In their literature review of ten qualitative and quantitative studies that focused on children and youth with impairments in social skills and/or cognitive disability, Orr et al. (2021) show that all three program styles are needed in order to meet the diverse needs of the participants with intellectual disability. The availability for each also provides the participant the opportunity to make the choice of the level of competitiveness based on the capabilities and desires of the participants (Grandisson et al., 2019).

The mainstreamed, or inclusive, option has been shown to be an effective way to promote friendships between those with disabilities and those without, and to help facilitate a change in attitude toward those with disabilities (Grandisson et al., 2012). Inclusive options also offer the opportunity for modeling of appropriate social and sport skills that can be demonstrated by players without disabilities (Block et al., 2013).

The Unified model, where typically there is a desired 1:1 ratio of participants with and without disabilities, is not always attainable in some communities with that

ratio. As with the Mainstreamed setting, the Unified model allows for more direct interaction yet on a more equally mixed team. Traditionally there is a 1:1 ratio but some communities are not able to meet that ratio due to lower numbers of those with intellectual disability in the community. Grandisson et al. (2019) conducted four focus group sessions with a total of 28 participants who were involved in inclusive sports settings, in specialized sports settings, or in both, with a mixture of athletes (both intellectually disabled and non-disabled), employees, coaches, parents, and volunteers. They found that one strategy is for the Unified organizers to be more flexible with that ratio and allow a higher ratio of disabled vs non-disabled participants (Grandisson et al., 2019). Setting common goals is another strategy highlighted by Grandisson et al. (2019) as well matching athletes by skill level and not by age. One popular unified program is Unified Champion Schools through the Special Olympics. Specialized settings are only for athletes with disabilities and should be facilitated by specially trained coaches, instructors, or teachers (Block et al., 2013; Roullet et al., 2015). Examples of these programs include Special Olympics for team sports and GiGi's Playhouse for recreational/creative activities.

Not all individuals who want to be involved in sports desire to be an athlete. It is important to provide opportunities on a team for those individuals that do not include actually playing the sport. These opportunities could include being a fan or a manager, as long as they provide an avenue for positive interactions and a sense of belonging (Grandisson et al., 2012). Grandisson et al. (2019) states that these additional non-player

positions on a team may fit better with a participants' desires as well as continues to facilitate contact with those without intellectual disability.

Lack of disability training for coaches was identified as a barrier to participation by individuals with disabilities (Carbone et al., 2021; Darcy & Dowes, 2013; Darcy et al., 2017) while a lack of training and support for teachers was highlighted by Legg et al. (2022) and Siperstein et al. (2017). Participants in the studies by Block et al. (2013) and Grandisson et al. (2019) stated that the training for coaches should include disability awareness, communication specifics, the basics of common disabilities, safety issues and facilitating social relationships between teammates. Coaches should also be trained on how to adapt equipment and activities to meet the unique needs of individuals and need to not only include videos and materials, but also hands-on demonstrations by experts. Grandisson et al. (2019) report that coaches want to better understand disability and the needs of those with intellectual disability. Specifically, the coaches say to tell them what "we need to know immediately...tell us what is ID...and give concrete strategies...ways to adapt exercises" (pg. 146). Also, this information can be embedded into the resources available to coaches and support staff so that the information is readily available to all.

In addition to the lack of training and support for teachers highlighted by Legg et al. (2022), Siperstein et al. (2017) added that it is necessary in order to break down the barrier of insufficient support from school administrators. When there is support by administration, the needs of the students with disabilities will be considered when



making decisions about scheduling, and about the physical features of the facility itself (Siperstein et al., 2017).

Peer support on the field and in activities is an additional way to break down the social barriers of participation in sports and activities. Peer support brings emotional benefits, skill development, and an understanding of and a comfort level with people with disability that was not present before (Grandisson et al., 2012; Scheef & Buyserie, 2020). Peer support has the potential to promote social inclusion through the direct interaction between those with disabilities and those without. In addition, peer support requires limited resources and is a realistic support for those with disabilities because the peers are already participating along the student with disabilities (Grandisson et al., 2019). Specifically, peers need to be trained to help the participant with disabilities to gain autonomy and how to facilitate relationships with each other (Grandisson et al., 2012; Pence & Dymond, 2015). It can be beneficial to choose more than one peer per participant with intellectual disability (Grandisson et al., 2012). Training peers to help organize events like a walking program or fitness initiative and establishing contact between the peer and the participant before the sport or activity begins is important to start developing that relationship (Grandisson et al., 2019). Participants with disabilities report that they prefer this type of support because it makes them feel most included in the activity without needing the support of an outside person (Grandisson et al., 2012).

Support for participants can also come from a companion or shadow. This person is generally not someone who is a part of the team. The companion or shadow would

accompany the participant to the activity and would be available to provide direct support for social cues, prompting to keep on task, or to modify any content or physical activity to meet the needs of the student (Block et al., 2013). The support the shadow would provide would be directly related to the specific needs, abilities, and desires of the participant (Grandisson et al., 2012). The shadow would preferably have experience in the sport or activity and be someone who has a passion for working with those with intellectual disabilities (Grandisson et al., 2019). Like the peer support training, the shadows would be trained to help the participant create autonomy and would help facilitate relationships with other members of the team or in the activity (Grandisson et al., 2019). Although shadow support is designed to be the first level of support for the participant, the goal is to eventually remove that support as the participant gains higher levels of independence (Grandisson et al., 2019). Coaches and parents have reported that the presence of the shadow is very reassuring to coaches, families, and participants so that they do not feel so isolated (Grandisson et al., 2019).

Another level of social and cultural support that can be provided to participants with intellectual disabilities is someone who acts as a resource for the coaches, families and persons with disabilities. The resource person is someone who can be contacted as needed or who is at the sport or activity each time the participant is. Because they are easily contacted, the coaches share that they are reassured since they know that someone is there when the need arises (Grandisson et al., 2019). As one coach stated, “when something happens and I have no tools, I can call (the resource person) and

someone will reassure me” (Grandisson et al., 2019, p. 148). The support person will be someone who already knows about intellectual disability and who preferably knows the athlete and the family yet is not a part of the team (Grandisson et al., 2021; Grandisson et al., 2019). Block et al. (2013) state that the support person is someone who helps the coach, the parents, and the participant and should be trained on instructional strategies so that all can participate in the activity regardless of disability or ability. According to the participants in the quantitative study with 250 participants in inclusive and specialized sport settings by Grandisson et al. (2021) that documented the perspectives of people engaged in sports and physical activities, a support person compliments the rest of the strategies identified.

In order to highlight the opportunities that are available to both those with disabilities and those without to be involved in activities or sports that are inclusive, awareness campaigns are necessary. Shields and Synnot (2016) sought to explore the barriers and facilitators of participation in physical activity for persons with disabilities. They conducted ten focus groups with 63 participants recruited through disability groups, sport and recreation groups, therapy services, and special schools and found that there is a disconnect between families of children with disabilities and groups that promote or advertise opportunities for inclusion. Parents tend to rely on word of mouth as well as individual research to find opportunities and partnerships with local organizations could be established that could promote programs and improve access to opportunities (Shields & Synnot, 2016). Within the Unified Champion Schools program,

this includes Whole School Wellness Events (Siperstein et al., 2017) that include regular pep rallies and other school-wide events with different themes to encourage the participation of those with and without disabilities. Specifically, when promoting events or opportunities, it is important to use messengers who inspire others, use short and concise videos and use diverse ways to reach a wider audience, integrate into existing structures when possible (Grandisson et al., 2019), and create long term opportunities, including inclusive sporting events, for people to play and meet (Grandisson et a., 2019; Roullet et al., 2015).

## CHAPTER III: DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

### Summary of Literature

This literature review sought to explore the benefits of inclusive sports and activities for adolescents and young adults with intellectual disabilities and the barriers that currently exist both in educational settings and within the community at large that create obstacles for persons with disabilities to fully engage in sports as equal participants as their neuro-typical peers. In addition, this review sought to illustrate concrete strategies that could be implemented to help break down those barriers and create opportunities for those with intellectual disabilities who desire to participate in sports or activities with peers.

### Benefits of Inclusion

Research shows that students with intellectual disabilities participate in sports and activities at a much lower rate than their neuro-typical peers. Research also shows that as students participate in sports and activities, their level of integration into the school environment increases (Bota et al., 2017). Friendship and social interactions increase as students with disabilities become more integrated into the school environment due to their involvement in inclusive sports and activities (Bota et al., 2017; Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Granddisson et al., 2012; Roullet et al., 2015).

Students with intellectual disabilities also report an increase in their sense of belonging which is tied to *togetherness*. *Togetherness* encompasses feeling like an equal part of a team, a part of a gang or family, participating at the same rate and level as

typically developed peers, and making connections on a team that includes more than just the players and can lead to alliances formed both on and off the field (Carroll et al., 2020; Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Gradisson et al., 2012; McConkey et al., 2013; McConkey et al., 2019; Siperstein et al., 2019; Wilski et al., 2012).

Students with intellectual disabilities show increased self-esteem and a more positive self perception as a result of participating on an equal level in an inclusive sport or activity. As skills advance, so does the athlete's self esteem as well as the perception that others have of the athlete (Bota et al., 2017; Carroll et al., 2020; McConkey et al., 2019; Roul et al., 2015). Research shows that as the athletes experience success in sports or activities, their self-esteem increases as they view themselves, their skills, abilities, and worth from a more positive perspective.

### **Barriers to Participation in Unified Sports and Activities**

The literature review identified three main barriers that persons with intellectual disabilities experience that create obstacles to or inhibit participation in inclusive sports and activities. The functional limitations of students with intellectual disabilities is diverse which creates complexities to adapting sports and activities for those with intellectual disabilities and can be limiting (Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Darcy et al., 2017; Roul et al., 2015).

Specialized transportation to and from sports and activities is lacking, unreliable and can be cost prohibitive for schools, organizations, and families (Argan et al., 2017; Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Grandisson et al., 2012; Legg et al., 2022; Roul et al., 2013). A

lack of appropriate facilities and equipment for those with disabilities creates an unsafe environment to equitably engage in sports and activities within school and community facilities (Carbone et al., 2021; Legg et al., 2022). The layout of a building, multiple stairways, inappropriately sized changing areas, adaptive equipment that has deteriorated and inaccessible spectator and entrances are common deterrents to participation (Carbone et al., 2021; Darcey & Dowse, 2012; Legg et al., 2022; Rough et al., 2015).

While physical conditions are often deterrents to participation, social and cultural constructs can discourage or inhibit participation of those with intellectual disabilities because without adequate support, athletes and their families will not participate (Darcy & Dowes, 2013; Carroll et al., 2021). These social and cultural constructs can include the attitude of others who believe that those with disabilities are unable to participate. In addition, they can encompass realistic supports including lack of adequately trained and knowledgeable coaches, lack of support for those attempting to organize inclusive sports and activities, and lack of support to access and participate in activities (Carbone et al., 2021; Darcy & Dowes, 2013; Darcy et al., 2017; Legg et al., 2022).

### **Supports for Inclusion**

Despite the many barriers to participation, this literature review identified concrete strategies that schools and communities can employ in order to make inclusive sports and activities accessible to students and persons with intellectual disabilities.

Individually, these strategies will not effectively remove barriers, yet by working in tandem with each other, the barriers that limit or prohibit participation can be removed (Block et al., 2013). These strategies follow a three-pronged model: Support, Programming, and Training (Block et al., 2013). Material supports include creating appropriate facilities through investing in facility upgrades (Rimmer et al., 2004), the purchase and upkeep of adaptive equipment (Grandisson et al., 2012; Roullet et al., 2015; Dieringer & Judge (2015), and providing consistent and reliable transportation (Darcy & Dowse, 2013; Grandisson et al., 2012; Roullet et al., 2015).

In addition to material supports, social and cultural supports help facilitate the participation of those with intellectual disabilities, which is the key to participation (Darcy & Dowse, 2013). Different levels of inclusive opportunities help meet the diverse needs of those with disabilities. Mainstream/Inclusive, Semi-Specialized/Unified, and Specialized are three levels of inclusion that can be made available and provided to meet the functional abilities and needs of the individual (Grandisson et al., 2012; Grandisson et al., 2019; Orr et al., 2021). In addition to providing appropriate opportunities to meet the diverse needs of individuals with intellectual disabilities, it is important to provide opportunities on a team for those who do not want to actually play the sport that provide avenues for positive interactions and a sense of belonging (Grandisson et al., 2012).

In order to provide the appropriate program for athletes, coaches, and other support personnel need to be trained in intellectual disability and provided additional



human resources where they can go for questions and to assist with any problems that may come up (Block et al., 2013; Carbone et al., 2021; Darcy & Dowes, 2013; Darcy et al., 2017; Grandisson et al., 2019; Legg et al., 2022).

Other supports for individuals can come from their peers on teams and in clubs and can positively influence an athlete's emotional development, skill development, and further social inclusion as well as foster a comfort level around those with disabilities from the peers' perspective (Grandisson et al., 2012; Scheef & Buyserie, 2012;).

Additional human support includes providing a companion or shadow this is not a part of team and is experienced in the sport or activity but who would accompany the athlete and provide direct support for the specific needs of the athlete (Block et al., 2013; Grandisson et al., 2012; Grandisson et al., 2019). Further, a trained resource person could be provided who would give support to the coach, families, and athlete, would accompany the person with disabilities to the activity, and be available at any time as a resource (Block et al., 2013; Grandisson et al., 2019).

Finally, awareness campaigns utilizing inspirational messengers, videos, and diverse means to reach an audience would be implemented to address the lack of information on what sports and activities opportunities are available to those with disabilities. This will help to educate families and organizations so they do not have to rely on word of mouth to find or advertise sports and activities (Grandisson et al., 2019; Roullet et al., 2015; Shields & Synnot, 2016).

### **Limitations of the Research**

To adequately address the research questions posed, the author of this literature review limited the research pool to adolescents and young adults from the ages of 14-21 and did not include research articles that specifically addressed the inclusion needs of students with disabilities that were between the ages of 0 and 13. The author also did not include research articles that addressed the needs of those over the age of 21 since they are not legally required to be served within the public school system over the age of 21.

In addition, the author limited the research to encompass individuals with intellectual disabilities in order to adequately address the research questions. Those with only physical disabilities, learning disabilities, emotional behavior disabilities, and other health disabilities were not specifically targeted within the research parameters.

The author limited the research to include inclusive sports and activities and did not include research that specifically addressed formal peer support programs within schools or school or district wide implementations of inclusive academic classrooms. These other areas of inclusion require district level approvals and school or district wide implementations that would include teacher and peer training and are beyond the scope of this article.

### **Implications for Future Research**

As stated by Grandisson et al. (2012) and Scheef and Buyserie (2012), peer supports can have a positive impact on the intellectual disabled athlete's emotional development, skill development, and further social inclusion as well as foster a comfort level around those with disabilities from the peers' perspective. This literature review sought to explore the benefits of inclusion from the perspective of sports and activities, yet further research needs to be done to explore the social, academic, and community benefits of peer support within the typical day of the school environment.

In the research for this article, the author found that peer support within classroom settings and common areas of a school building enhanced the social and academic experiences of students with intellectual disabilities. Malone et al. (2019) conducted an ABA single subject design study to explore whether the assistance of three peer tutors for three students with significant cognitive disabilities increased the meaningful participation and engagement of the student with disabilities by 75%. They also observed that even when the official intervention period was done, the students continued to engage in a reciprocal manner (Malone et al., 2019).

Block et al. (2016) studied how to successfully train peers to provide support to students with significant cognitive disabilities and then generalize that support across classrooms. When the results were analyzed, they found that not only did the students with disabilities increase their interactions with peers and improved progress on their IEP goals, but 75% of the peers showed gains on their own academic goals. Carter et al.

(2016), using a randomized controlled trial with pre-, post- and follow-up measures, studied a group of 99 high school students with severe disabilities, 106 peer partners, and 51 school staff members to analyze how peer interventions affected academic and social participation of those with severe disabilities and found that while academic engagement decreased in the control groups with paraprofessional support only, it increased by 6.9% for students with peer support. Social engagement increased for those in the peer support group and 40% of those partnerships reported that they remained friends a year later.

While a small sampling of the available data, these three studies show that peer support in the academic setting, as in the sports and activities setting, can have significant positive influence on the participation, engagement, skill development, and social interactions (and creation of friendships) of those students with intellectual disabilities. Further research into benefits, barriers, and supports of a peer tutoring system within the classroom would bring more inclusive practices into schools.

### **Implications for Professional Application**

Findings from this literature review highlight the importance of creating inclusive opportunities to students with intellectual disabilities in the areas of sports and activities. The review has shown that skills, engagement, and social interactions increase for those with disabilities as well as their feelings of self-confidence and belonging. First, existing barriers limit or prohibit participation in inclusive sports and activities need to be identified. What do the facilities look like? Where are the barriers within a facility

that limit the access of those with disabilities? Is usable adaptive equipment available that is appropriate for the sport or activity? What social and cultural supports are lacking that inhibit full participation of those with disabilities? As Darcy & Dowes (2013) report, if meaningful support is not there, athletes and their families will not participate (p. 400).

Second, once the barriers have been identified, strategies can then be developed and implemented to help break down barriers so that those who wish to participate, can. Block et al. (2013) stated that support, programming, and training are three areas on which to focus in establishing an inclusive program. The needs, desires, and abilities of the individual student must be taken into account when providing the appropriate level of support. Support can include material support as well as human support of the student. Once the space for participation is found, barriers can be identified and repaired, replaced, or needed upgrades built. An assessment by an occupational therapist will help to identify where the students need the most material support and which equipment would be appropriate to meet those needs. The case manager and family can assess the level of support the student has at home, school, and out in the community and select peers or adults, or both, to provide the student with the appropriate support. For coaches, families, and others involved in the inclusive sport or activity, resources can be gathered to provide readily available assistance to those who need it.

Programming options are then identified that best meet the needs of the individual students. Is it more appropriate to implement a mainstream program, a unified model, or specialized model? Depending on the environment, resources and needs of the students, a hybrid option may also be appropriate. For those students who do not wish to participate as an athlete, providing opportunities for those students to manage or provide other options for them to engage is important.

Lastly, the community needs a way to advertise and families need a way to learn about opportunities. Neuro-typical peers and staff are exposed to students and athletes with disabilities as events and opportunities are promoted through pep rallies, sports, social media, and other means to help create more long-term inclusive opportunities for those with intellectual disabilities.

## **Conclusion**

The author sought to identify the benefits of participation in sports and activities for those with intellectual disabilities, the barriers to participation, and the supports that can be provided to help eliminate the barriers and allow participation in sports and activities by those with intellectual disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities have the right for the opportunity to be fully engaged in sports and activities with their neuro-typical peers. Darcy and Dowes (2013) speak of sports participation as a part of “disability citizenship” (p 394) in line with employment, housing, education, and medical care. Providing every opportunity for students with intellectual disabilities to engage with their peers in sports and activities in a safe and equitable environment benefits not

only the students with disabilities, but the people around them as well. Accessibility, knowledge, supports, and meaningful activities will help provide our students with intellectual disabilities the same opportunities for social engagement, skill building, and higher self-confidence that is already readily available for those without disabilities.

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