

An Assessment of Community Attitudes and Behavior to Inclusion of Youth with Disabilities in Youth Sports and Recreational Activities

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Introduction

The acceptance of the capabilities of persons with disabilities is greater in the United States than in many other countries (Siperstein, Norins, Corbin, & Shriver, 2003). In school settings inclusion is widely practiced. Within education inclusion is discussed and evaluated in an ongoing manner, but how do those outside the system see and define that concept? Attitudes toward inclusion outside of the school setting are not as well studied. Activities for youth with disabilities exist in the study area such as those provided through the community centers and Special Olympics. These programs do not include non-disabled youth except as advisors and coordinators.

Teachers in the Transition Program of the study area strive to reach the goal set forth in the motto of the program – “As Independent As Possible.” Achieving independence requires working with students to develop self-advocacy skills so that they may be included in those activities that are of strong personal interest. In the school system the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) promotes inclusion of students with disabilities. Individualized Education Program (IEP) planning includes assessment of student strengths and inquiry into personal interests. Goals are set to develop the skills needed to be successful. Inclusion of students with disabilities in activities contributes to their increased quality of life (Felce, 1997).



In the community outside of the school setting inclusion is less of a priority. There it is dependent upon the policies and procedures of the various organizations and businesses supporting youth activity. These groups are not bound by the tenets of IDEA. Whether participation is actually encouraged or discouraged by non-academic organizations is not known. It is important for teachers to explore the willingness of these organizations to fully include youth with disabilities so that planning efforts can be realistic and interests can be pursued as desired by these youths. This study will look at the attitudes and policies of those organizations within the study area boundaries that permit or disallow participation by youth with disabilities.

Materials and Methods

- ❖ A list of organizations that provide youth with opportunities to participate in group sports, social, and leisure activities within the study area was compiled.
- ❖ Directors and business owners were requested to anonymously respond to questions about staff training, requirements for participation, and who participates.
- ❖ Additional questions were asked to elicit attitudes toward participants with perceived or obvious disabilities.
- ❖ The responses were compiled and analyzed in a qualitative manner and presented in narrative form.
- ❖ Compiled responses were shared with Special Education teachers in the study area to inform their planning discussions of curriculum needs for the programs.



Survey Questions

1. What is the nature of the recreation or leisure activity that your organization/club/business provides?
YES/NO
2. Do you have a mission statement? YES/NO
o Does the mission statement address ability or disability? YES/NO
o Is including people with disabilities in the statement? YES/NO
3. How many staff persons do you have?
4. Is disability discussed with staff as part of staff training? YES/NO
o Who trains the staff?
o Are there any problems with staff compliance with that training? YES/NO
5. Who typically uses your facilities or services?
6. Do people with disabilities participate in your activities? YES/NO
o If so, what type of disability have you seen in the facility?
7. Do other participants approve or complain about the participation of people with disabilities? YES/NO



Results

- ❖ 15 of 55 groups and businesses responded, for a response rate of 27%.
- ❖ 1 respondent declined to continue when asked about staff training.
- ❖ Some respondents saw incarceration and poverty as disabilities.
- ❖ Overall results were positive, as most respondents had experience with disability in their programs.
- ❖ Some respondents reported attempts to actively work with people with disabilities but felt stymied by a lack of support from parents and community.
- ❖ Some respondents actively sought to find ways to include people with disabilities in their programs.
- ❖ In groups providing athletic activities, people with disabilities were less likely to be included in competitive settings.

Conclusions

Alliances are built between the Transition Program and the community organizations and businesses that the students will be accessing when they leave the program. Positive attitudes toward the idea of inclusion exist in the community. More work needs to be done to define specific areas where supports can be improved. Assistance can be provided to businesses and organizations to improve services for people with disabilities who wish to engage in the activities that they offer.



Literature cited

- Felce, D. (1997). Defining and applying the concept of quality of life. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*, 41(2), 126-135.
- Siperstein, G., Corbin, S., Norins, J., & Shriver, T. (2003). Multinational Study of Attitudes towards Individuals with Intellectual Disabilities. *Washington, DC: Special Olympics International*.

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For further information

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