

2022

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Recommended Citation

Zhang, Jingyuan; Ray Miranda, David; and Xin, Yan Ping (2022) "Disability Awareness Program for Young Children: A Community Service-Learning Program at Preschool and Elementary School," *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement*. Vol. 9 : Iss. 1, Article 7.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284317393>

Available at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/pjsl/vol9/iss1/7>

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Disability Awareness Program for Young Children: A Community Service-Learning Program at Preschool and Elementary School

Cover Page Footnote

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to volunteers, including Amanda Austin, Hannah Crosley, Charissa Voorhis, John J. Augustine, and Sungwoo Kang. We would also like to thank the school administrators and teachers who helped make this program possible.



DISABILITY AWARENESS PROGRAM FOR YOUNG CHILDREN:

A Community Service-Learning Program at Preschool and Elementary School

Jingyuan Zhang (*MEd, Special Education*), David Ray Miranda (*MA, Applied Behavior Analysis*), Yan Ping Xin (*PhD, Special Education*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Jingyuan Zhang is a fourth-year PhD student in special education. Jingyuan graduated from a top-ranked university in China with a bachelor's degree in law. Her enthusiasm for social justice has motivated her to serve marginalized populations such as children with disabilities, orphans, and the elderly. In China, she led legal awareness programs for the community. This experience has given her the necessary tools to initiate a disability awareness program at local schools in the United States. She successfully initiated and ran the disability awareness program for two consecutive semesters in a local elementary school and preschool.

David Ray Miranda is a second-year PhD student in special education. David has a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's degree in applied behavior analysis. David's research interests include developing behavioral support for students with disabilities. Throughout his first year, David helped to develop and provide the disability awareness program.

Approximately 26% of Americans (approximately 61 million people) in the United States have at least one disability (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). Fourteen percent of all public school students ages 3–21 years old (approximately 7.3 million students) were identified as having a disability impacting academic performance and received special education services during the 2019–2020 school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). Since 1975, the U.S. Congress has enacted legislation promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities in the least restrictive educational placement (e.g., the Education for All Handicapped Children Act [EHC] and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]; Brock, 2018). This inclusive education philosophy is beneficial to every child, no matter what their ability level is (Agran et al., 2020; Cosier et al., 2013; Dessemontet et al.,

2012). However, being part of an inclusive classroom does not guarantee that a student with disabilities will have a positive experience. For instance, negative peer beliefs and attitudes about disabilities may negatively impact the social inclusion of students with disabilities and their ability to make friends (Diamond & Tu, 2009; Nabors & Keyes, 1997; Nowicki & Sandieson, 2002).

Research has shown that a child's negative attitudes toward disabilities appear to be based on perceived differences and perceptions about the disability (Diamond & Tu, 2009; Nowicki et al., 2014). Disability awareness programs have been identified as potentially effective interventions to change peer attitudes as they increase the learner's understanding and knowledge about disabilities (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013). As young children are still learning and forming their opinions

about disabilities, it would be important to target this population (Lindsay & Edwards, 2013).

Because the first author had children attending a local preschool and elementary school, she was familiar with the lack of disability awareness programs in both schools and wanted to create a program to teach children how to acknowledge and respect other people's differences, including disability status. The first author also believed that she could address this need while providing service opportunities to her fellow doctoral students and collaborating with local schools as community partners. After several communications with the first author's advisor and two local schools, the first author initiated this community engagement project of providing a disability awareness program to two local schools. Through this project, the disability awareness program team attempted to fulfill the following four objectives:

- Objective 1. Introduce the concept of disability to young children and teach them that these differences are part of diversity.
- Objective 2. Provide engaging activities for young children to understand the experiences of people with disabilities better.
- Objective 3. Provide opportunities for doctoral students to share their knowledge on supporting people with disabilities while engaging in community service.
- Objective 4. Develop collaborative relationships between doctoral students and community partners

DESCRIPTION

Community Partners

Our first community partner was Sunshine Preschool (Sunshine; a pseudonym), a university-affiliated child-care school center for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Sunshine served this community by providing childcare services to the general public and faculty, staff, and students at the university. There were 59 children enrolled in Sunshine during the time of our program. Among those students, 58% were Caucasian, 41% were Asian, and the remaining 1% were from other ethnic groups, including Russian, German, and French. Sunshine occasionally has kids with disabilities enrolled in the program, and some children were later identified as having disabilities after their enrollment. Sunshine aims to create a community where young children can grow through active engagement and discovery.

During prior conversations, Sunshine's director expressed interest in introducing a program to expand children's awareness of disabilities and promote inclusive practices. Although Sunshine is affiliated with the university, we provide information about Sunshine in this section about community partners because our team was not previously partnered with Sunshine, and we worked in collaboration with the Sunshine staff to develop and provide the disability awareness program. In addition, Sunshine was one of the two sites where we provided disability awareness programs, and we felt that providing information on only one site would not provide a holistic picture of our program.

Our second community partner was Caring Elementary School (CES; a pseudonym), a local elementary school that serves approximately 973 students from kindergarten to fifth grade. CES contains a diverse global community with students from 36 countries in attendance. The most current student population was 64.3% Caucasian, 14.9% Latinx, 8.4% Asian, 7.8% Black, 4.3% multiracial, 0.2% Native American, and 0.1% Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. Around 41% of students qualified for free or reduced meals through the National School Lunch Program, and 14% of students received special education services. As part of its mission, the CES school district aims to educate all students in an environment that supports them and their desire to learn.

Building the Connections

The first author initiated this program after getting approval and support from her advisor, the third author. The partnerships with the local schools were built through daily communication between the first author and school staff. The idea of this disability awareness program began through a casual conversation between the first author and a classroom teacher at Sunshine. After the first author shared her research with the teacher, the teacher expressed a strong interest in introducing the concept of disability to her students. The first author then met with Sunshine's school director about providing several sessions of the disability awareness program across different classrooms at Sunshine. The director was excited about this program and welcomed PhD students from special education to implement the program. After getting permission from Sunshine's school director, the first author began to manage all the preparation for the program.

Similarly, the first author reached out to a CES school-teacher and asked if they wanted to have the disabilities awareness program. The teacher welcomed the program and notified school administrators, who later provided their approval to implement the program at the school.

Disability Awareness Program

After getting approval from the school administration, the first author then met with teachers to discuss initial presentation content and activities and schedule times to provide the disability awareness program. After an initial investigation, the team identified factors that limited students' access to learning about disabilities. First, neither school had programs to teach students about disabilities. Second, both schools lacked personnel who had the knowledge to teach about disabilities. Finally, the schools did not have books to introduce the concept of disabilities.

The first author asked other doctoral students in special education to volunteer for the program to address these barriers. After an initial email and announcement during class, five doctoral students agreed to volunteer for the program. This team of students then worked on developing appropriate activities, materials, and disability-related topics for the students.

One challenge our team faced was developing age-appropriate presentations for different age groups. Research on early childhood development shows that young kids may have extensive differences physically, mentally, and emotionally across each developmental stage (Sims & Brettig, 2018). Our audience for this program ranged from age 2 to age 7, so we divided students into three age groups: toddlers, preschoolers and kindergarteners, and first graders. The first author investigated the research literature and tried to find models and best practices to follow. However, this attempt failed as she did not identify specific models for our specific population. The first author developed the program structure based on the discussion with teachers and the first author's prior observations of teacher classroom activities. To help generate ideas about materials and activities, the first author did an internet search and met with other doctoral students to brainstorm ideas for topics and activities.

After additional communications with CES schoolteachers and the Sunshine school director, the first author finalized the disability awareness program sessions. Sessions were approximately 40 minutes long, and there were four components in each session: topic introduction, book reading, hands-on activities, and final discussion. First, one volunteer introduced the topic of disability by relating it to the concept of differences and inclusion. For example, one volunteer had students recognize their hair color and pointed out that even though we all had different hair colors, we could all still be friends. The volunteer then discussed how this is also true for people with disabilities.



Figure 1. Graduate students from the College of Education Special Education Program discuss attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) with preschool students (ages 3–5).

Second, a volunteer read a book related to disabilities and asked students questions to help them reflect on the similarities and differences between the characters with and without disabilities. The research team identified multiple age-appropriate books based on teacher reporting of students' comprehension levels, and each teacher selected the specific book read in their classroom. Books read to the students included *All Dogs Have ADHD*, *All Cats Have Asperger Syndrome*, and *When Emma Met Charley*. The only other materials for our program were self-adhesive bandages and activity cards for the role-playing activities.

Third, a role-play activity facilitated students' understanding of challenges that people with disabilities may encounter. The activities were different for each age group and were approved by the teacher. For toddlers, volunteers demonstrated appropriate and inappropriate ways to interact with someone who uses a wheelchair and asked questions to reflect on these examples. For preschoolers, students engaged in a role-playing activity of putting on their coats while only using one arm. For



Figure 2. Preschool students (ages 2.5–4.5) engaging in book reading.

first graders, students were involved in role-playing activities on how to communicate with people with communication disorders. Students would likely struggle to finish the task for some activities, so we used these as opportunities to help students better understand some struggles of people with disabilities and help them complete the task. To end the hands-on activity, students shared their experiences and reflections on this activity.

Finally, we ended our session with a final discussion where a volunteer talked about appropriate ways to interact with people with disabilities. We discussed topics such as treating people with disabilities equally, asking if they need help before offering help, service dogs, and being a good friend. During this time, volunteers also asked students questions about these topics and allowed students to reflect upon these topics.

Throughout the whole process, schools provided support in curriculum preparation and implementation. Teachers provided input on preferred activities and topics, and they actively selected the books for the presentations. Teachers also provided classroom



Figure 3. A preschool student participating in the “One Hand Dressing Up” activity.

management support and helped students reflect on the activities and topic. The teachers’ positive attitudes and support throughout this whole process largely contributed to the program’s success.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

Program Evaluation

When we originally planned this project, we did not develop a formal feedback process and primarily relied on verbal feedback. We indirectly evaluated the program effects by checking students’ responses to questions during the classroom instruction. We also asked teachers and volunteers about their perception of the disability awareness program and their experiences.

Student Responses

During the activity, students from both schools engaged in book reading, hands-on activities, and discussions. Students asked great questions and provided appropriate answers to most of the questions. For example, some students said they thought the activity was hard to do and would have liked help. This statement demonstrated that the students could relate to the experiences of people with disabilities. Additionally, after a program session at the elementary school, one of the students mentioned

knowing someone who uses a wheelchair and then said, “We are different, but different is just different, and different is okay!” This statement from the student is encouraging as it demonstrated her positive understanding of disability, diversity, and inclusion.

School Feedback

Teachers from both schools also provided very positive feedback for our program. One teacher said: “I would love for this to be a program that happens more often in class. I don’t think that the students are familiar with different disabilities. I found the program very helpful!” Another teacher told us: “I love the different activities you had for the students to allow them to get up and to move and then sit back down. It kept them engaged. The examples you gave were great too!” These teacher responses helped to show that the teachers found the program beneficial and engaging to the students.

Volunteer Feedback

Volunteers appreciated this opportunity that connected them to the community and expressed enjoyment in working with the students. Some of the participating doctoral students stated that this experience helped them strengthen their belief in using their professional knowledge to benefit people with and without disabilities. These feelings of responsibility and achievement further encouraged them to advance their research in the special education field and led their thoughts about developing practical innovations for education.

Challenges and Barriers

In addition to developing age-appropriate activities, we faced two significant challenges. The first was conducting this program during the COVID-19 pandemic since it affected school accessibility and the program schedule. We frequently communicated with two schools to face this challenge and kept tracing their policy changes. Fortunately, both schools were accessible when we implemented the program, and we did not have to reschedule any programs.

Second, our team prepared well for the program but did not have any funding. Although this project does not require much money to implement, we still need materials for the book reading and the activities. To lower costs, we read books borrowed from the county library and had minimal necessary materials. We wanted to buy disabilities-related books for each school, and students showed great interest in the books we presented during the program. However, we could not provide these books to the children.

Future Opportunities

With the positive feedback from both participating schools, our disability awareness program may provide future opportunities for Purdue students to engage in, extend the program to other grades in the elementary school, and upscale the program at Sunshine and CES. It is also worth mentioning that our disabilities awareness program is a simple model that can be applied in any school with young children. More opportunities could be explored if we reach out.

STUDENT IMPACT

This project is perfectly aligned with our academic training in special education. We summarized knowledge about the characteristics of disabilities to make an understandable lesson for young children. During the program implementation, the team also practiced their presentation and question answering skills so that even young children could easily understand the topic.

We recognized through our program that community partnership is crucial in building and sustaining a successful program, but it was not as hard to develop as we had initially thought. The idea of this program started with a casual conversation, and it was eventually formed by the first author taking action to meet the needs of both schools. A stable and lasting partnership should be established based on frequent communication and should be mutually beneficial. The schools appreciated the opportunity for children to broaden their understanding of disability, diversity, and inclusion. Our team had the expertise and resources to meet schools’ needs, and we gained experience in collaboration and presentation.

During our program, we also learned real-world problem-solving skills. During an activity in a lab school classroom, one child kept making noise and moving around, trying to get everyone’s attention. The teachers tried different strategies to stop him from distracting the other students and help him to focus on the ongoing program, but it didn’t work. The teacher told the team that the child had just enrolled in the classroom, and he could only understand Chinese but not English. Given that, the first author, who came from China, talked with the child and helped him understand that he needed to sit down quietly like his friends. The first author also translated and explained the program to this child. After hearing the program in a language that he could understand, the child was surprised but later calmed down and listened to the story.

CONCLUSION

The community engagement project enhanced the university-community connection and nurtured young children's awareness of disability. This project also reinforced the sense of community responsibility among Purdue doctoral students through community engagement. As we prepare for future disability awareness programs, there is a need for more volunteers and resources.

As both participating schools are planning for more sessions of our program, and we hope to extend the program to a broader community, more volunteers are needed for this program. For better program outcomes, it is expected that volunteers will have adequate knowledge about the common characteristics of people with disabilities and have a passion for serving people with and without disabilities. Financial support is also vital for acquiring resources such as disability-related books or posters that can remain in the schools after the program.

Finally, we hope this service-learning project will inspire Purdue students to initiate their own programs to create service-learning and community engagement opportunities. As we mentioned earlier, this project began through casual conversations with schoolteachers. Through collaboration with the partner schools and fellow PhD students, our team developed the project. Today, this one idea has now positively affected many young children.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to extend our deepest gratitude to volunteers, including Amanda Austin Borosh, Hannah Crosley, Charissa Voorhis, John J. Augustine, and Sungwoo Kang, and Special Education Program in College of Education. We would also like to thank the school administrators and teachers who helped make this program possible.

- Zhang, J., Miranda, D. A., & Xin, Y. P. (2022). Disability Awareness Program for Young Children: A Community Service-Learning Program at Preschool and Elementary School. *Purdue Journal of Service-Learning and International Engagement, 9*, 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.5703/1288284317393>