

Original Paper

The Inclusion House: Lessons Learned During the First Year

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Abstract

The Inclusion House is a unique dorm where nondisabled students training to be leaders in the faith community, live side-by-side with same-aged individuals with intellectual disabilities. After one year, a qualitative study using semi-structured interviews was conducted with the nondisabled roommates. Findings showed overall positive feelings involving watching roommates with a disability become more independent, learning to balance roles as a friend vs. helper, and knowledge gleaned about working with these types of individuals as well as their families. These recommendations are essential for improving living conditions at the Inclusion House and the implications of educating future church leaders on how to include people with disabilities and their families in faith communities.

Keywords

inclusion, seminary education, people with intellectual disabilities, faith communities

1. Introduction

Many individuals with disabilities may encounter obstacles when worshipping at a church. The Friendship Ministries report that people with a wide range of disabilities (which include mental illness, physical, visual, and intellectual disabilities) feel that these obstacles that surround the church can include architectural barriers, as well as communication and attitudinal barriers (Center for Persons with Disabilities, 2016).

It is estimated that 47% of people with disabilities report that they attend church once a month, and 85% percent of people with and without disabilities say that religious faith is an essential aspect of their lives (National Organization on Disability, 2001). This discrepancy shows that these individuals do not attend church as much as they may wish. These individuals need advocates within faith-based communities to explore different ways of incorporating individuals with disabilities into the church and break down the barriers of communication, attitudes, and misunderstanding.

One must also realize that post-school outcomes for youth with intellectual disabilities are generally dismal. For example, the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) data analysis revealed that

few transition-age youths with intellectual disabilities worked for pay, participated in organized community group activities, and interacted with friends regularly (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Interestingly, researchers have found that community participation in a faith-based organization is one of the most frequently cited activities by individuals with intellectual disabilities (Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Shogren & Rye, 2005). Even though 87% of individuals with disabilities reported that their religion was “very important” or “somewhat important” to them, these individuals with intellectual disabilities have a lower rate of participation in faith-based communities compared to nondisabled individuals (Harris Interactive, 2004).

In addition to low participation in community events, several studies indicate that a significant number of individuals with disabilities have not achieved post-school success in terms of residential independence (O’Hara, Cooper, Zovistoski, & Buttrick, 2007; Office of Special Education Programs, 2000; Woolf, Woolf, & Oakland, 2010). For example, a much higher percentage of these individuals live with assistance from family members or in a group home than the general population (Association of Regional Center Agencies, 2003; Prouty, Smith, & Lakin, 2001).

Living as independently as possible and active participation in the community is important goals shared by individuals with disabilities as well as their families (Ivey, 2007). However, gaining this level of independence is difficult for people with intellectual disabilities due to generally lower self-determination skills that can influence abilities in daily living skills (Taylor, 2000; Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003). These types of skills are challenging for many individuals with intellectual disabilities. Nevertheless, these skills are critical for living independently and meaningful community participation in their local community (Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003).

Beyond personal challenges, another roadblock to residential independence is the limited housing options available for adults with intellectual disabilities (Karaim, 2012). For many years, the Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities Housing Task Force (O’Hara et al., 2007) has documented a lack of affordable and accessible housing for individuals with intellectual disabilities. In addition, states report shortages of adequate housing for these individuals (Karaim, 2012; Moses, 2005).

With housing barriers in mind and the idea of training future faith-based leaders about individuals with disabilities, advocates created an affordable, safe housing option on a theological graduate school campus. A new residential initiative (which in this article will be called the “Inclusion House”) was created. The Inclusion House is a small residence hall where individuals with intellectual disabilities live side-by-side with similarly aged nondisabled students attending a seminary or receiving a degree from a private Christian liberal arts college. This housing type differs from the group home model, where several individuals with intellectual disabilities live with one nondisabled live-in monitor. The Inclusion House is a freestanding residence hall. The Inclusion House consists of four rooming suites, each containing three rooms for nondisabled students and one room for an individual with an intellectual disability. The three nondisabled roommates share a bathroom, whereas the individual with an intellectual disability has

his/her own bathroom. Common areas such as a kitchen, laundry facilities, deck, and TV room are shared among the entire group. During this initial year, such four suites were filled.

This type of living arrangement is a new endeavor. Research has been conducted on postsecondary living for adults with disabilities (e.g., Kowatch, 2008), but a thorough literature review found no studies on people with intellectual disabilities co-existing with same-aged nondisabled roommates studying to become religious leaders or Christian professionals in a residential setting like the Inclusion House. Because of this, insights from the nondisabled roommates in the first year of living at the Inclusion House are needed. Specifically, it was aspiring to study these roommates' perceptions of this initial year and gather recommendations for future nondisabled students who would like to live in this unique setting.

2. Method

2.1 Purpose and Participants

This study aimed to seek understanding and illumination of the perceptions of nondisabled roommates living at the Inclusion House during this first year. To that end, qualitative research was employed as a program evaluation. As Merten and McLaughlin (2004) emphasized, this methodology focuses on gathering a rich picture to provide a deeper understanding of a specific phenomenon. In this case, it was desired to study the first year at the Inclusion House from individuals who had intimate knowledge about this innovative residential facility.

The Inclusion House is located on a midwestern theological campus in a rural area. The nondisabled roommates volunteered to live at the residence hall, knowing that they would be residing in a suite with two other nondisabled students along with an individual with an intellectual disability. The individuals with intellectual disabilities were not seminary students (not enrolled in any classes) but people who desired to live independently and experience living on a university campus. For the nondisabled roommates, there was no incentive from the seminary to live in this setting.

Since this dorm type is rare, the number of qualified participants was minimal. As a result, the recommendation of Wiersma and Jurs (2005) to use a purposeful sampling to represent was followed. Four suites in the dorm were filled during the first year for a total of 11 potential nondisabled respondents. Eight of these agreed to participate in the study (73%). All were Caucasian. Three were completing their undergraduate studies in social work or special education teaching at a Christian four-year liberal arts college; five were in graduate school at a theological seminary. Three roommates were male; five were female. All participants were between 21 and 26 years old. There was no monetary or material incentive to participate in the study.

2.2 Procedure

The research used a semi-structured open-ended interview, which allowed respondents to answer specific questions that were determined in advance, but also allowed the researcher to probe the interviewee to elaborate on a response or follow a line of specific inquiries if deemed necessary (Brill, 2008; Hancock, 2002). Before the actual study, individuals who had experience with people with intellectual disabilities

and university students and knowledge about qualitative research participated in two pilot studies of the interview. After each pilot study, notes were made of suggestions concerning the wording and sequencing of the questions. The present research study created and used a revised version of the original interview. A packet consisting of a formal invitation to participate, a consent form, and a self-addressed, stamped return envelope was mailed to the entire population of nondisabled roommates living in the Inclusion House. Participants indicated a convenient time when the researcher could call to conduct the interview. After one week, the packet was mailed out again to those who did not initially respond to garner as many participants as possible. Ultimately, eight roommates (73%) returned the consent form, agreeing to be contacted for the study.

Upon receiving the consent form, the participant was called at the designated time, and the interview was conducted. The taped interview and notes taken during the interview provided reliability or dependability (Seidman, 1998). Fraenkel and Wallen (1993) noted that the advantages of audio recording is that it allows the researcher to address internal validity by preserving the tapes and replaying them several times for continued analysis. Audiotaping ensures exposure to all data collection phases, analysis, questioning, and reevaluation.

2.3 Data Analysis

After transcribing the audiotapes, an identifying number along with a fictitious name was placed on the transcribed interview to protect anonymity, thus eliminating any potential risk or repercussions for the participants. As the initial step of transcribing the interviews, the researcher copied the completed transcribed interviews and handed out copies to two research assistants. After reviewing the transcripts, these researcher assistants identified and wrote down initial code categories. Then the researcher assistants independently analyzed the same data to determine if they arrived at similar conclusions; if disagreement occurred, the third researcher independently analyzed the data, at which point a final decision was made. This technique incorporates the recommendations of Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, and Spiers (2002) to confirm that the researchers understood the responses, thereby ensuring trustworthiness and enhancing the credibility or validity of the data.

The interview results were divided into topical units indicating patterns across the questions and placed in file folders. This structure follows Berg's (2004) recommendations since the practice of this cutting and sorting into file folders is used in qualitative analysis to organize categories, themes, and patterns. The specific categories are reported and discussed below.

3. Results

Analysis of the interviews followed the underlying research questions (a) nondisabled roommates' perceptions with regard to living at the Inclusion House during its first year of operation, (b) recommendations for changes and improvements for the following year, and (c) recommendations and advice for other Christian students studying to become leaders in the field to considering such a living arrangement. The results are presented by the line of inquiry.

3.1 Perceptions on First Year

This question asked roommates to reflect on their year of living at the Inclusion House and report their perceptions. Four general themes emerge: (a) watching roommates with disabilities (also called “Friends”) grow in their self-determination/independence skills, (b) learning life lessons from living at the dorm, (c) balancing the roles of being a roommate and/or guardian, and (d) lacking communication and support.

An overwhelming number of roommates emphasized the joy they felt watching their roommates with an intellectual disability improve social skills, develop confidence, and become more independent during the school year. The individuals with intellectual disabilities had been living with their families until they moved into the dorm, and often their parents had performed simple tasks for them that they could do themselves. Since individuals with disabilities now had to negotiate independently, their independence or self-determination skills began to blossom in this new environment. These skills included learning how to appropriately talk to one’s roommates, being considerate when living in a suite with busy university students, and finding one’s own fun and entertainment. Stephanie reflects on her feelings:

I loved watching our Friends [roommates with disabilities] grow in their social skills, confidence, and independence. When my roommate [with an intellectual disability] first moved into the dorm [Inclusion House], she was shy and quiet. She always asked me for permission to do things. Now she is off doing her own thing with her own friends and can cook and clean by herself. She [roommate with a disability] grew because of this experience!

On a broader scale, this newfound independence of the roommates with disabilities helped improve these individuals’ self-determination skills, which in turn will help them be successful in everyday living skills. Many roommates mentioned how much they learned from living at this particular dorm. All of the individuals with disabilities had jobs (either full-time or part-time) and had to learn about transportation and successful job skills in order to keep those jobs. Also, the roommates with an intellectual disability had to be able to take their appropriate medications, clean up after themselves, and learn about money skills. The development of these skills was surprising for the nondisabled roommates as they watched their roommate with an intellectual disability go to work each day, along with successfully doing daily living skills. However, the nondisabled roommates were also educated about the stereotypes that were quickly given to their roommates. Many roommates’ eyes were opened to stereotypes concerning individuals with intellectual disabilities. They noticed how vulnerable people with intellectual disabilities are at times and how others can take advantage of this childlike vulnerability. In turn, many roommates also discovered that people with intellectual disabilities are capable in many respects if allowed to be more independent. Amanda summarized:

I truly enjoyed living at the Inclusion House and getting to know these Friends [roommates with disabilities]. They [roommates with disabilities] opened my eyes to a lot of things. This experience allowed me to see how this population of people is perceived in the community. I also realized how much they were really capable of doing on their own. Their abilities were much higher than I was expecting.

It was a consensus from the participants that the individuals with disabilities were able to become more independent if allowed to try tasks on their own with minimal assistance as well as being required to have job skills so they could be successful with some type of employment during the day.

Other roommates commented on how they learned to find joy in simple pleasures due to living with people with an intellectual disability. While in the suite studying for tests, writing papers, and dealing with the typical stresses of being a university student, the roommate with an intellectual disability would often walk into the common area to talk and crack some jokes to lighten the mood. A hard-working nondisabled student, Gina noted that this made the entire suite more relaxing while reminding the nondisabled students of the importance of laughing and unwinding during the day:

I enjoyed just seeing the joy of someone living and loving life out loud. I love that! My Friend [roommate with a disability] takes such joy in life's simple pleasures, and it has taught me to step back, breathe, and sit down for a while with her and just laugh, hang out, and remember all that God has blessed me with.

Many of the nondisabled roommates expressed their feelings of happiness and decompression of stress when their roommates with intellectual disabilities lightened the mood in the suite.

Over this year, the roommates got to know each other. Bonding began. Stereotypes and the uneasiness with being with people with intellectual disabilities that were once embedded were erased. Carl discussed the special connection with his new Friends with intellectual disabilities and how it impacted his life, causing life-altering changes:

One joy about living at the Inclusion House was the Friends [with disabilities] and getting to know them and connecting with them. It was also a life-changing moment in my life. I am overjoyed because my eyes have been opened to what the lives of the Friends [with disabilities] are like and how they live.

Some of the roommates with disabilities had girl/boyfriends and enjoyed an active social life. This living situation made the nondisabled roommates realize that it is sometimes necessary to break down perceived ideas and ask questions about his or her life in order to get to know the person intimately, in this case, the individual with an intellectual disability. In other words, the nondisabled roommates began understanding that these individuals with intellectual disabilities were at times similar to them and had some of the same frustrations, heartaches, and joys as they did.

Respondents also reflected on the challenges of balancing the role of being a buddy and roommate with also being a mentor and somewhat of a "parent" figure for the roommate with an intellectual disability. Relatives asked roommates of the individuals with disabilities to help with medications, cooking, and laundry. However, at odds with these requests were the seminary's instructions to the nondisabled roommates that the individual with an intellectual disability be as independent as possible and not to assist with these chores directly. At times, the nondisabled roommates did not know how to handle

specific situations and the pulling between the two parties (relatives vs. seminary staff). Tom summarized these experiences as follows:

I had to balance my role of giving guidance and suggestions to my Friend [with a disability] while still giving him [roommate with a disability] the freedom and independence to do his own thing and to figure out things for himself. This balance was difficult. At times, I didn't know what my role should be. Trying to find the precise balance between aiding the roommate with an intellectual disability performing household tasks and letting this person try to be independent as possible was a noted struggle for the nondisabled roommates.

Roommates play different roles and face different challenges when living with a person with an intellectual disability. For example, some roommates with intellectual disabilities needed more supervision than others, and, as a result, the nondisabled roommate had to help set the rules as well as reinforce these rules in the suite. It could be challenging to set appropriate consequences for rule-breaking for a same-aged individual with an intellectual disability. But during the course of the year, the nondisabled roommates realized that setting appropriate rules and then after the roommate with a disability understood. They applied these rules, and it was necessary to back away and slowly release this supervision role. Balancing these roles was essential for enabling the roommates with intellectual disabilities to become more independent and develop greater self-determination skills. Brenda reflected:

I learned when and where to draw that fine line between being a friend and a mother. This was very tough and is a continuous learning experience for me. It was the hardest thing for me, but I feel like it is getting easier. I am learning that at times my special Friend [roommate with a disability] is able to do something, but she asks for my help just to get attention. I have to remind myself to let her do it on her own. Learning to juggle these roles took time. However, most nondisabled roommates directly asked the person with an intellectual disability what was needed and tried to let this individual attempt to do activities independently, allowing for the development of independence skills.

An overwhelming number of roommates commented on the lack of communication and support they received from the residential director living at the dorm. The seminary staff had originally told them that if a problem occurred and they needed advice on handling a situation with the roommate with an intellectual disability, they were to seek counsel from the residential director. Indeed, the offer of such extra support made the nondisabled roommates feel more confident when initially agreeing to live in this hall. However, the residential director was seemingly unavailable to help during the year since he/she was often out of the building. Steve echoed the sentiments of many other nondisabled roommates in the following summary:

There was a position of a residential director, who was supposed to help us [nondisabled roommates] with the Friends [roommates with disabilities]. The residential

director did not communicate with us [roommates with disabilities and without disabilities] when he/she would be gone and tell us where we [roommates with and without disabilities] should go if someone needs help. He/she [the residential director] was not available. This led to complications. For example, one day, the Friends [roommates with disabilities] locked themselves out of their rooms and could not get back in the dorm for many hours.

It appears that the role of the vibrant and assessable residential director was crucial to the success of the functioning of the Inclusion House since this person was the individual to whom roommates could ask questions and brainstorm solutions to potential problems.

3.2 Improvement and Changes

This question asked nondisabled roommates what improvements and changes they would suggest for the Inclusion House for the following year in order to get more university students interested in living at this new residence hall. Their answers fell into themes surrounding (a) the need for a mandatory orientation discussing the expectations of living at the Inclusion House and receiving basic information about intellectual disabilities and (b) a need for a stronger community feeling within the dorm.

Nondisabled roommates reported that before agreeing to live at this dorm, they needed detailed explanations of what to expect while living in this unique housing arrangement. Some talked about the need for an orientation given by a professional with in-depth knowledge of individuals with intellectual disabilities. Such an orientation would help give clear expectations and answer questions about living with people with intellectual disabilities and what resources were available when problems arose. Another suggestion was creating a telephone tree to handle emergencies as swiftly as possible. In addition, coordinated communication between the parents, roommates, and the residential director would be beneficial. Steve proposed:

[To help next year], I would have training and a list of expectations [about living at this dorm]. I would have someone to be a clear “in-charge” figure for someone to go to for answers to questions [about a roommate with a disability] and to give help. Another idea would be to meet with the parents [of the roommates with disabilities] to understand this resident [with a disability] before living together.

Knowing what persons with intellectual disabilities could do and when they needed assistance was unclear for the nondisabled roommates who wanted to help guide their roommates with an intellectual disability to be as independent as possible. Some suggested that an orientation and training meeting before everybody moved into the Inclusion House could give the answers to these types of questions. Further, several expressed the need to foster a sense of community within this residence hall. The nondisabled roommates were full-time university students with deadlines to meet, papers to complete, tests to take, and personal lives to live. Because of their busy schedules, they rarely had time for social outings with roommates with disabilities or other people in the dorm. In addition, the resident director

should have organized social events for the dorm. Gina expressed disappointment among roommates with and without disabilities that a true community at the Inclusion House did not develop:

As a community, I did not feel like we were very close. I took the initiative to get to know the special Friends [roommates with intellectual disabilities], but I think that I could have put more effort into making friends with the other roommates [without a disability] and going out with the Friends [individuals with intellectual disabilities] more in a social setting outside the dorm room.

A sense of community could have been stronger with more dorm activities planned with all roommates. The residential director did not initiate these activities during this year.

3.3 Recommendations and Advice

This final question asked respondents if they would recommend this living to others and what advice they would give to other nondisabled students considering living in the Inclusion House. Two responded that they would not recommend this living situation, whereas six said they would recommend it to others. In general, advice to others included finding resources and going into this environment with a willingness to learn about individuals with intellectual disabilities.

3.3.1 Recommendations

The two roommates who failed to recommend this placement to others cited reasons such as not feeling recompensed for the time and effort they put into living with roommates with an intellectual disability. For example, some individuals commented that this was a tougher living situation than expected because of the time needed to give guidance, support, and direction to the roommates with intellectual disabilities and felt that seminary personnel and the resident director should acknowledge this fact. The seminary personnel should have been upfront with the possible problems and, at times, provided incentives such as free Internet service as compensation for living in this dorm. Tina endorsed:

The Inclusion House needs more incentives [for nondisabled roommates]. I understand we [nondisabled roommates] live here because we want to have the growth that comes along with the experience. I understand that living at this dorm is meant to be pretty much a volunteer situation. But I feel like no one cared [the resident director nor the seminary staff] about my extra time and effort while living here.

Some nondisabled seminary roommates indicated that living at the Inclusion House required much more time and energy than they believed when considering this housing option.

However, the overwhelming majority of the nondisabled roommates responded that they would recommend this type of placement to others who want to gain a better understanding of people with intellectual disabilities and their families, as well as growing personally and professionally for their future careers. Many enjoyed the experience because they were able to break down stereotypes, learn about nurturing and enabling a person with an intellectual disability, and develop skills for working with these types of individuals and their families. As reflected by Brenda, this experience would be unique and eye-opening to an employer as well as future nondisabled roommates:

I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience at the Inclusion House ... I would, and have already recommended this opportunity and experience to others. I have seen the benefits of this experience not only in my personal life, but having it on my résumé and being able to tell what I have learned about ministering to these individuals [with disabilities] have been impressive to future employers. I would tell them [future nondisabled roommates] all the positive things as well as emphasize how GREAT the roommates with disabilities are. I am going to miss them so much when I have to leave!

Several nondisabled roommates thrived living in this unique residence hall. The combination of benefiting their personal lives as well as being able to share their new skill set on how to welcome both people with disabilities and their families made these nondisabled students believe that living in this dorm was a beneficial experience.

Others commented that meeting new people and making friends with people with intellectual disabilities helped broaden their worldview and prepared them to be more compassionate when working in their upcoming jobs and assisting and interfacing with these individuals and their family members. Steve expresses:

It [the Inclusion House] is a place that encourages growth as a person. I believe that it [this living experience] will help me be more compassionate and understanding when I have to work with a person with a disability or his family in my future career.

For some, living at the Inclusion House allowed for unique experiences that a person would not have in the university or seminary classroom setting about learning about working with families as well as individuals with disabilities.

Advice. Advice to incoming nondisabled roommates focused on being open and prepared to learn while also becoming familiar with resources and where to go for help and guidance related to living with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Resources included outside agencies, seminary staff, or simply feeling comfortable enough to ask the parents of the roommates with disabilities for recommendations on handling a certain situation. As noted by Amanda, these extra supports would help both the roommates with and without disabilities maneuver through the year successfully by giving extra guidance during trying times:

It would be helpful to the new roommates [without disabilities] to find agency resources and get help from the seminary staff and the Inclusion House's residential director. It would be even better if the seminary personnel helped locate certain agencies [that help and service individuals with intellectual disabilities] and have these agencies were in place before the other [nondisabled] roommates moved in for the year.

Resources, including agency professionals and university staff, were deemed necessary to help in the success of this house and aid with the well-being of all roommates.

Many nondisabled roommates advised future roommates to enter this unique living situation with an open mind and a willingness to learn about people with intellectual disabilities. This type of living situation can be a struggle, but overcoming one's possible initial feelings of not being comfortable with people with intellectual disabilities could open up many possibilities for new friendships. Also, by putting different supports in place (see above), the seminary roommates believed the dorm would thrive. Looking back on the year, many seminary roommates commented that they had made lifelong friends with their roommates with intellectual disabilities. Tom notes:

It [living at the Inclusion House] takes patience, sometimes creativity, and an open minded, flexible person. But I would tell anyone who wants and needs a roommate to consider this type of seminary housing. I think it's a neat and unique opportunity and a privilege to live here at this dorm [the Inclusion House]. I have learned so much.

It takes a person with an extraordinary personality to live in this dorm; that is, a person who has patience, an inclination to learn, and a willingness to share in the life of a person with an intellectual disability.

4. Discussion

In this study, interviews were completed with the nondisabled roommates of the Inclusion House to assess their perceptions of the first year of living at this seminary dorm, gather suggestions for the upcoming year, and learn whether they would recommend this type of housing to others. Several themes emerged, including (a) joy at watching roommates with disabilities grow in their self-determination/independence skills, (b) learning life lessons from living at the dorm, (c) difficulty in balancing the roles of being a roommate and/or guardian, and (d) lack of communication and support from the seminary staff at the Inclusion House.

Based on participants' responses, this type of independent living encouraged the roommates with intellectual disabilities to grow and improve their independence skills. The respondents believed that because the roommates with disabilities had to do many things for themselves, somewhat unsupervised (such as taking medication and maintaining a job), they became more independent overall.

This development of self-sufficiency skills is significant since research has shown that this critically important component is often lacking among persons with disabilities (Zhang, Katsiyannis, Singleton, William-Duhr, & Childes, 2006). Studies have found that individuals with disabilities with high levels of self-determination skills do much better in such living areas as paying phone and grocery bills, having bank accounts, and obtaining meaningful post-school employment (Miller & Chan, 2008; Palmer & Wehmeyer, 2003).

Many nondisabled roommates reported being unprepared to handle situations that arose in the dorm with their roommates with disabilities but had to make decisions and locate resources that would help all involved. This kind of decision-making stretched their thinking beyond the classroom, where they were given fictitious incidents about families and/or individuals to real-life situations.

The participants believed that living in the Inclusion House had given them experience and real-world knowledge that they could put to use in their upcoming careers. This finding is significant because the nondisabled roommates are training to enter a field, they need to handle challenging circumstances while still welcoming all into the church. Research has shown that individuals in these career fields are asked to support families in difficult situations. New professionals must know agencies and personnel to help struggling families (Birch, Duplaga, Seabert, & Wilbur, 2001; Russell, 2003). Specifically, Louis (2008) pointed out that living with a child with a disability helps deepen and enhance professional skills when working with families with children with disabilities. In addition, research has suggested that for individuals in the helping professions to understand and identify with somebody's feelings or difficulties, it is essential to have firsthand knowledge of the situation (Washburn, 2008).

Respondents also reported that they were confused about the nature of their roles concerning the roommate with a disability. The roommates with disabilities were required to be independent as a condition for living at the Inclusion House. Therefore, roommates concluded that roommates with disabilities would not need much assistance. However, it became apparent that in some situations, the roommates with disabilities needed assistance performing such life skills as laundry and cooking. In short, the nondisabled roommates' roles were confusing, and the seminary staff and families were not communicating clearly.

Kowatch (2008) noted that support and participation from parents is necessary to establish a successful living arrangement for individuals with disabilities. This finding shows that it is crucial to keep parents and family members, friends, and other support personnel actively involved in the life of the person with a disability (Cock & Boaden, 2011; Epstein, 2007). Active involvement requires thoughtful and meaningful communication (Epstein, 2007). Thus, routine communication with families and individuals supporting individuals with disabilities will help facilitate the discussion of complex topics that may arise later (Graham-Clay, 2008; Olson & Hyson, 2003). Such communication must be timely, frequent, and clear, including specific follow-through strategies (Russell, 2003). Having access to open discussions and communication, the roommates without disabilities could have cleared up the confusion surrounding their roles and responsibilities. This clear and specific type of communication may also help the individual with a disability and his/her family feel welcomed in the faith-based community. As Carter (2007) recommends, a pastor needs to communicate how their church is opened to individuals with disabilities and their families, be an advocate for this type of inclusion in the church setting, to design inclusive religious education programs for the individual with disabilities of all ages, and to query how the faith-based organization can support the spiritual growth of these individuals and their families.

In addition, to help empower the roommates, specific training must occur. Bemak and Cornley (2002) concurred, saying that to build positive partnerships, community professionals (including counselors, pastors, teachers, social workers, and agency personnel) can be called upon to train roommates. In addition to training, relevant agencies can serve as resources. Many people (e.g., parents, pastors, friends, roommates, agency personnel, and teachers) working together versus in isolation will benefit individuals

with disabilities (Cock & Boaden, 2011; Epstein, 2007). Therefore, the suggestion of having an orientation for all roommates, parents, and seminary staff would be constructive for the upcoming years. Finally, respondents noted that the Inclusion House lacked a community feeling. They attributed this to a failure to befriend the other dorm members due to work schedules, heavy class loads, and the residential director needing to organize social events. Feelings of belonging and friendship are essential for everybody. When people work together to become an authentic community, they can meet challenges and overcome obstacles (Woolf et al., 2010).

According to Cookson (2004), the sooner people get to know each other's names, the sooner a positive and caring environment and a sense of community can be fostered. Having informal programming and activities for the roommates at the beginning of the school year would allow people to get to know each other more intimately (Cookson, 2004) and help create a place where everyone feels welcomed and validated (Dahlman, 2008). These necessary skills will bleed into the future vocation skills of these nondisabled roommates, in other words, when they become church leaders and work with individuals with disabilities and their families. Powell (2016) suggests that church leaders can develop a caring environment and a sense of community for individuals with disabilities and their families at the church by organizing support for caregivers, including individuals with disabilities in small groups, and volunteering to assist in a Sunday School classroom with a child with a disability.

Overall, the nondisabled students living in the Inclusion House had positive feelings about living in this unique housing. Valuable recommendations were given to seminary personnel, families, and individuals with intellectual disabilities with the goal of improving living in this new residence hall for all stakeholders.

4.1 Limitations and Future Research

This study used qualitative research methods to assess the perceptions of roommates without disabilities concerning their first year of the Inclusion House, a unique housing arrangement whereby seminary students without disabilities lived side-by-side with individuals with intellectual disabilities. Despite the promising results, some limitations deserve mention.

First, generalization of the findings is limited because of the nature of the subject sample, that is, roommates without disabilities living at the Inclusion House. This sample constituted a limited group and may not represent all individuals who might live at the Inclusion House or a similar setting.

Further, social desirability is a concern when using interviews. Some participants may respond based on what they perceive is expected of them or what they deem socially or politically correct (Patton, 2002). Thus, although participation was voluntary, the validity of the findings may be limited due to the bias inherent in the data collection methods used.

This study provides new information on a unique housing option for individuals with intellectual disabilities. Many unanswered questions remain. For example, future research is needed to investigate the perceptions of parents and roommates with disabilities. Comparisons of attitudes provide essential

information about the effectiveness of this type of housing. In addition, follow-up studies could help determine whether the changes implemented helped improve living conditions in the Inclusion House. Currently, there is a critical shortage of housing for people with disabilities. This research and future studies along similar lines might help remedy this situation by opening up new and exciting options for individuals with and without disabilities and others who would like to walk alongside these exceptional individuals. There is also a great need for future leaders in a faith-based community to learn how to include individuals with disabilities and their families in faith-based settings and advocate for programs for these persons.

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