

Examining the Inclusive Summer Camp Environment as an Opportunity for Developing Social and Self-Determination Skills of Youth with Disabilities

Overview of the Study's Focus

This study is based, in part, on the ongoing research and development actively being conducted at the Institute on Community Integration (ICI), College of Education and Human Development, on inclusive community practices for children and adults with disabilities. My faculty sponsor is Dr. David R. Johnson, Director of the ICI and Professor of Educational Policy, who has mentored me throughout the development of this proposal and research project.

An inclusive environment, in an educational context, is one in which children with and without disabilities are placed in the same setting. As explained by Odom and Diamond, inclusion serves multiple purposes and presents each child an equal opportunity to develop in a normal and integrated environment⁽¹⁾. An important aspect of this development is in a child's ability to acquire and cultivate friendships, proficiencies, healthy lifestyle habits, and an overall purpose and meaning in life. Like all children, those with special needs require a way in which the development of these social and self-determination skills can be fostered. Participation in stimulating and intrinsically motivating recreation and leisure activities offers a central means for the growth and development of such skills in children both with and without disabilities⁽²⁾.

The development of social and self-determination skills has been shown to positively impact individuals throughout a lifetime. In a concept expanded by the definition from Michael Wehmeyer, a self-determined act has been defined as one that is self-regulated and performed autonomously by an individual in a fully capacitated and consequential manner. A follow-up study review on self-determination among youth with disabilities found that self-determined students had a higher quality of life, increased involvement in educational and decision making settings, and a greater number of positive life outcomes in adulthood⁽³⁾. In a similar context, the

initiation and development of social skills, especially among youth with non-verbal tendencies (e.g., those with autism), has been shown to decrease disruptive behavior and limit the need for interventions among youth disposed to problematic interactions with other individuals and deficits in social skills and behaviors⁽⁴⁾.

Purpose of the Study and Primary Research Question

Previous research has shown that both an inclusive and recreational environment supports the needs of youth with special needs and fosters the development of social and self-determination skills⁽²⁾. Therefore, using an inclusive summer camp environment that offers a variety of recreational skills as the setting for this research study will help to maximize the potential for growth of social and self-determination skills.

The primary research question of this study is, “To what extent does the interaction between children with and without disabilities at an inclusive summer camp program increase the self-determination, social skills, and overall inclusion of the children with disabilities?” I hypothesize that the social and self-determination skills of these youth with disabilities will develop and improve throughout the summer as they become more actively involved and engaged with other children, daily activities, and the overall summer camp experience.

Study Methods

Setting

This summer, I will return as the Director for the Summer Day Camp Program of the St. Charles Parks and Recreation Department in St. Charles, MO. This summer camp program is unique in that it offers an all-inclusive environment for children of all needs and capabilities, ages 6-14, to participate, engage, and interact with each other throughout the summer months. I have witnessed the improvements in behavior and development in our children with special

needs during the summer camp experience and thus, have chosen to use this summer camp program as the setting for this research project.

Instrument Development, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

To measure the growth of the social and self-determination skills of these children, I have designed a study scale instrument, the *Youth Participation and Engagement Scale*, in which observations on the participation and engagement level for different behaviors and activities will be measured and recorded by assigned counselors for each child. This instrument was designed with reference to the typical behaviors seen among these children in the daily summer camp setting, and also the *Supports Intensity Scale: Adult Version*⁽⁵⁾ of the American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities and the *Arc's Self-Determination Scale: Adolescent Version*⁽⁶⁾. This developed instrument will be filled out twice a week, each week that the child participant is enrolled in the day camp program. The data collected in the first week of enrollment will be used as a baseline measure for comparison of data obtained in the subsequent weeks of enrollment for each participant. The duration of the summer camp program is 10 weeks during the months of June, July, and August, and data collection will cease at the end of the enrollment of each participant. After the data have been collected, the obtained scores for each participant will be quantitatively analyzed to determine if an increase in the frequency of participation and level of engagement of each social and self-determination measure results as a consequence of the participant's immersion in the inclusive and recreational environment.

Potential Positive Impacts of the Study

The creation of the *Youth Participation and Engagement Scale* will not only help to quantify and analyze the changes in social and self-determination skills for purposes of this study, but this scale is also planned to replace a previous evaluation form used by the Recreation

Council of Greater St. Louis in summer camp programs of municipal parks and recreation departments in St. Louis, MO. This instrument will allow for a more holistic, quantitative evaluation of each enrolled child with special needs. A two- to four-page research brief and a poster will also be developed to summarize the findings and results of the study. The research brief and poster will be presented to the St. Charles Parks and Recreation Department administration and staff. I will also register to present the poster on this study at the annual Undergraduate Research Symposium at the University of Minnesota.

References

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