

How does involving a special education student with Down Syndrome in sports influence the attitudes and behaviors of both himself and the regular education athletes on the team throughout the track season?

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Introduction

I have been a special education teacher at Readington Middle School for the last nine years. Readington Middle School (RMS) is a 6th through 8th grade school which is part of the Readington Township School District. Located in the 48 square mile beautiful town of Readington, the district is comprised of four schools, two Pre-Kindergarten through third grade elementary schools, one fourth through fifth grade intermediate school, and one sixth through eighth grade school with a total student population of about 1800.

According to the 2012-2013 School Performance Report, Readington Middle School has an enrollment of 747 students. Of the enrolled students, 17% are classified students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPS). Most of the students come from white upper class families. RMS is known for being dedicated to academic excellence. The students at each grade level are placed on to one of two academic teams, Blue or Gold, for their core classes, Language Arts, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, and World Language. Each team of teachers works together to provide the students with high quality instructional experiences, while fostering a team feeling. The school offers a variety of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular programs. Students are offered a choice of three languages, Spanish, French, and Mandarin Chinese, as well as a comprehensive arts and music program. RMS also has a full athletics program offering fall, winter, and spring sports for both male and female students. It is also home to over twenty clubs which range from Student Council to Gardening to Robotics. Overall, the students at Readington Middle School are held to a high academic standard, but are also offered a variety of opportunities to learn and grow outside the classroom.

I began my career as a special education teacher nine years ago at Readington Middle School. During my time here, I have taught a variety of subjects and grade levels including: 7th and 8th grade Language Arts Resource Center, 6th grade Science Inclusion, 8th grade Science, Social Studies, and Language Arts Inclusion as well as Language Learning Disabled (LLD) classes. Most of my time at the school has been spent in the 8th grade, which I never imagined myself teaching, but I absolutely love.

This year, I am fortunate enough to be teaching at the 8th grade level for my entire day. Each day I teach three Social Studies Inclusion classes with a fantastic co-teacher that I have worked with for the past three years. In each class, we have 17-24 students with each class having 6-9 classified students for whom I am responsible. I spend the other half of my day teaching two LLD 8th grade boys. The boys, one who has Autism, and one with Down syndrome, are with me for In-Class Resource Replacement Social Studies (a combination of in-class and pull out instruction), Resource Science, and a combined 6th-8th grade LLD Life Skills program. My day allows me to teach a wide range of students with varying disabilities, and believe me there is never a dull moment.

Outside of the classroom, I am very involved in the Readington Middle School community. I have served as one of two 8th grade team leaders for the past five years. I am also the coordinator and planner of the 8th grade overnight trip to Baltimore and Washington, D.C. I have served as one of the Student Council co-advisors for the last three years, where I help to plan and facilitate many fundraising events, including the largest fundraiser in the district, the Annual Lip Sync Competition. Some of my most rewarding experiences come from the one-on-one relationships I have with students serving as a mentor and a coach. I mentor a 7th grade girl who I had in class last year.

We have lunch 3-5 times per week to just chat about her life, and help to keep her on track academically. I am also an athletics coach for my student with Downs Syndrome. I am with him as he manages both the boys' soccer and basketball teams during the Fall and Winter, and as he competes in the Spring as part of the Boys Track team. It is clear that my life at RMS keeps me very busy.

When I first began to think about topics for my teacher research project in the RTC EDUC 510 *Exploration of Classroom Inquiry* class, I felt completely overwhelmed. Through assignments, discussion, activities, and most importantly my journal, I was forced to reflect on my teaching more so than I have ever done in my career. It became clear to me very early on that I wear many hats at RMS, I am not just a special education teacher. I have taken on roles as a leader for my fellow teachers, and a mentor and coach to my students. Possible topics began to swirl around in my mind, but it was hard for me to choose one thing that was most important to me.

As I was thinking, the one thing that was clear to me was that my research would focus on the thing I am most passionate about, my special education students. I see these students in the general education and resource settings, so I could see many opportunities for teacher research. I initially wondered if I could find out how my inclusion students felt about the two teacher model that they were a part of and if they actually felt that they benefitted from having two teachers in the room. Although I was interested in the topic, I was unsure if I could actually get the students to be honest and open about how they felt without making them feel as if the spotlight was on them and their disabilities. I also did not want to draw too much attention to a co-teaching situation that was working seamlessly, so my thoughts began to turn to a new topic.

By the end of the 510 class, I was sure that my research would focus around the topic of student grouping. In my Social Studies Inclusion, we teach using the *History Alive!* program, which relies heavily on group work and projects. The students are working almost daily with their peers in groups. My co-teacher believes that it is important for the students to choose their own groups, but I wondered if grouping the students in different ways would help to increase the quality of their work. I thought that grouping them in either random or deliberate ways might increase their output. The possibilities seemed endless, so I thought I right on track to having a successful teacher research project.

A few weeks before my two colleagues and fellow RTC students and I were set to start the 601 class, we decided to attend one of the final presentations of the teacher research projects by students. As we looked around the room and listened to the presentations, it was clear to us all how much time, hard work, and passion that had gone into each of the projects. The topics of the projects ranged from using a new online textbook to making the curriculum more “green” to increasing student motivation. The ideas were all so different. As I was listening, one of the presentations in particular fascinated me. The teacher focused her project on the effects that her mentoring had on one particular student. She had known the student for several years, and their mentoring relationship had gone through several changes. In her presentation, it was clear that she was dedicated to helping him, and showing how much mentoring could change not only the student, but the teacher herself. This project got my mind spinning. My colleagues even turned around during the presentation to say “Melissa, this is right up your alley!” I

thought that the idea of exploring student grouping was a great one, but I knew it was not something I was completely passionate about. My mind was beginning to race.

A week before class was set to begin; I was still thinking about the mentoring project that I had seen. I had been wracking my brain trying to figure out how to adapt it to my own mentoring situation with my 7th grader. One afternoon, I was at a wrestling match to try and pass the time before my student with Down syndrome, Zachary, was set to play in the Boy's A Team Basketball game in a special period just for him. My colleague and fellow graduate student and I began to talk about our research topics again. It was then that she mentioned to me that she thought I should use my coaching experience with Zachary being a part of the track team as my project. That was it! The bells and whistles went off in my head. This was the perfect way for me to blend my passion for coaching and mentoring with my love of the LLD students into a project that was "me."

Zachary is a 14 year old boy with Down syndrome. Over the past two years, I have been working with him after school to get him involved in the sports program at our school. We started his involvement as a manager for both the baseball and basketball teams as well as the ball boy for the soccer team. This let Zachary be with his peers and cheer them on, as well as accept the responsibilities of a manager. As he stood on the sidelines of the games, I could see that he was yearning to participate. As an active member of several sports leagues for students with disabilities as well as a decorated Special Olympics athlete, I began to think of ways that he could actually compete in a mainstream sport on a school based team. One day as I stood watching Zachary play basketball with his typically developing peers, I could not have been more proud. I saw

that when Zach stepped onto the court, the feeling in the gym completely changed from one of competition, to one of community. The players and parents were no longer worried about who was winning or losing, they all came together to cheer on a boy who may not be a typical athlete, but was star athlete in eyes of his peers for that three minute period. After scoring six points and getting his own Z-A-C-H cheer from the cheerleaders, I think that everyone left the game with a smile on their face. The school would be talking about this moment for the next week. I began to think, if Zach could have this much of an effect on people in such a short period of time, he could surely change his peers in the upcoming track season. This is a feeling I wanted to focus on for my teacher research project.

As I wrote in my journal during the first weekend of 601, my topic become clear, I wanted to explore the effects of including a student like Zach in sports would have on the other athletes on the track team. Through discussion with my classmates and professor, I was able to refine my question to one that I was happy with: *How does involving a special education student with Down Syndrome in sports influence the attitudes and behaviors of both himself and the regular education athletes on the team throughout the track season?*

I could not feel more passionately about my topic. I am excited to begin my research and see what effect Zach being on the track team has on both him and his peers. I know how much he has changed me in my three years of working with him, so I am confident that Zach and the team as a whole will be positively impacted by the experience.

“Promoting the Participation of Children with Disabilities in Sports, recreation, and Physical Activity”

- Specialized programs help children with disabilities
- Many health concerns are associated with people with disabilities: more sedentary, prone to obesity
- Involvement in activities helps form friendships, develops skills, gives meaning to life
- Be careful when choosing an activity for student with disabilities. Make sure it's one that they enjoy and poses no health risks
- Be sure to consult a doctor first

“Parents’ perceptions of health and physical activity needs of Children with Down Syndrome”

- Studied preschool-adult children with Down Syndrome
- Middle School
- Students no longer want to participate in special needs activities– want to participate in activities with non-disabled peers
- Showed strong interest in being with friends
- Motor skills didn't match cognitive skills- too strong for special needs programs
- Wanted to play the sport without modified rules or younger students
- Liked the challenge

“Special Ed Students Get a Sport on the Team”

- Unified Sports program started by Special Olympics
- 2,000 schools in 42 states participate
- Ideal teams are half special ed, half general ed
- Fosters friendships
- Makes special ed students feel connectedness to school instead of social exclusion
- Keeps students more active.
- Goal is to teach empathy to students

“Garrett’s Story”

- 23 year old MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) fighter with Down Syndrome
- Never got along with disabled peers, did not want to be associated with them
- Dad challenged sons to try the sport– Garrett was the only one who accepted
- Keeps up with other fighters, wants to compete
- Parents encourage his fighting despite critics
- Now a MMA instructor for children, including a teen with Down Syndrome
- Overcame obstacles and stereotypes
- Now accepts others with Downs

Identifying the barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity for children with Down Syndrome”

4 Facilitators (encourages participation)

1. Positive role of family in physical activity
2. Opportunity for social interaction
3. Availability of programs suited for Down Syndrome
4. Child's physical skills and personality traits

4 Barriers (hindered participation)

1. Characteristics or conditions associated with Down Syndrome (low muscle tone, heart defects, obesity)
2. Availability of family to be involved in activities
3. Reduced physical or behavioral skills associated with Downs (lack motor skills, coordination, cognitive gap too great)
4. Lack of accessible programs for children to participate

Literature Review

Including Special Education students with disabilities in sports is not a new movement, but it is one that is growing across the country. The article “Special Ed. Students Get a Spot on the Team” by Nirvi Shah, highlights this new movement in high school sports, called Unified Sports. Over 2,000 schools in 42 states across the nation have added Unified Sports to their sports offerings for all students. Shah (2012) explains these teams as follows: “Unlike traditional high school athletic teams, Unified Sports Teams are designed to immerse students with intellectual disabilities in a facet of school culture that has largely eluded them (p. 1).” These teams allow for disabled students to play sports alongside their non-disabled peers as partners. The ideal makeup of these teams is to have half of the team be students with intellectual disabilities, and half to be non-disabled partner athletes, who play as equals. The Unified Sports teams were created over 20 years ago by the Special Olympics Organization, which was founded by the late Eunice Kennedy Shriver. Shriver “created Special Olympics to put people with intellectual disabilities, often hidden, in the spotlight (p. 2)”. She created the Unified Sports Teams as part of the larger program of Project Unify. The program has one large goal, to teach empathy to its participants, by showing them how to treat people that are different than them.

Participants in the program have said that these teams help to get students with disabilities included socially in the school, whereas they were in their own social circle before. The teams also helped to show that despite their differences, the athletes have a lot in common as they are all teenagers. It also fosters friendships between the athletes, which leads to the disabled students to feel a sense of connectedness to their school

community, instead of social exclusion. The program also helps students with disabilities to be more active, and practice their fine and gross motor skills (Shah, 2012).

This program is completely remarkable to me. It promotes exactly what I believe that students with disabilities should be included with their non-disabled peers. I think that schools that take part in Unified Sports really have something to gain in doing so. I am just trying to include one disabled teenager in track with his peers and seeing the impact that he will have. Unified Sports shows that the inclusion of special education teens in sports can have a wide impact on not only the participants, but the school itself. Fostering inclusion, social skills, and school connectedness are only some of the proven benefits. I am sure that I will find many more.

In the report “Promoting the Participation of Children with Disabilities in Sports, Recreation, and Physical Activities”, Nancy A. Murphy and Paul S. Carbone outline the benefits of including children with disabilities in activities. Although there have been specialized programs in place for disabled people since the “first competitive sporting event for individuals with disabilities in 1948, followed by the first Paralympics competition in 1960, and establishment of the Special Olympics in 1968 (p. 1057)”, Murphy and Carbone (2008) suggest that it is important for them to also be included in recreational sports and activities with other peers, not just those like them. Individuals who have been involved in specialized programs such as Special Olympics “have shown heightened self-esteem, perceived physical competence, and peer acceptance (p. 1058)” compared to their peers who do not participate. These programs can have such a beneficial effect on disabled athletes, but their participation should not end there.

There are many health concerns for people with disabilities. Often times they have a more sedentary lifestyle, so they are more prone to obesity than their peer due to their lower level of fitness. This is one of many reasons that it is important to get people with disabilities involved in activities. In their study, Murphy and Carbone (2008) found that “the participation of children with disabilities in sports and recreational activities promotes inclusion, minimizes deconditioning, optimizes physical functioning, and enhances overall well-being (p. 1057)”. The physical benefits of participation are obvious, but it can also help disabled people to increase their psychological health. Participation in activities helps all that are involved in that it helps to “form friendships, develop skills and competencies, express creativity, achieve mental and physical health, and determine meaning and purpose in life”, all of which are areas in which people with disabilities normally struggle. It can also “foster independence, coping abilities, competitiveness, and teamwork among children with disabilities (p. 1058).” These are all skills that are hard for individuals to learn on their own or through schooling, so to learn them in a social setting with their peers makes learning more concrete and meaningful (Murphy & Carbone, 2008).

This study also brings up some valid points to consider before involving a student with disabilities in activities. It is important to select an activity not only that a participant enjoys, but also has little risk of contact or collision, which may be dangerous to the participant. It is also important to consider the participant’s health status, and select an activity that is appropriate for them to be included in. Depending on their disability, some individuals may be more apt to participate in group or team sports and activities, while others may thrive in individual ones which can be better adapted to fit

their needs. Overall, many considerations must be made before including individuals with disabilities in activities, but one should not let their disability become a barrier for participation, it should be a catalyst.

Prior to reading this article, I was really only focusing on the psychological and social benefits associated with having students with disabilities participate in sports. This study brought to light the many physical and health benefits that it can have on the participants. So many times students with disabilities are told that they can not to what they want to do because of their disability, but this study proves that they are able to select activities that can improve their health and psychological well-being, and they can do anything they put their mind to with the proper supports in place.

Zachary, the student I will be using in my study, is not just a student with a disability; he is a student with Down syndrome. I felt that it was important to take this into account when finding articles review, because individuals with Down syndrome have a specific set of common characteristics that either aide or hinder their participation in sports. In the study “Identifying the barriers and facilitators to participation in physical activity for children with Down Syndrome” Barr and Shields aimed to identify the facilitators and barriers to an individual with Down syndrome being involved in a sport. In their study, which was conducted in Victoria, Australia, they interviewed “a total of 20 parents (16 mothers, 4 fathers) of 18 children with Down Syndrome (10 girls, 6 boys) aged between 2 to 17 years (p. 1022)” to find out how much physical activity their child was involved in and the factors that made their involvement easier or more difficult.

The findings of the study were extremely interesting. Through analyzing the data collected in their interviews, Barr and Shields were able to identify four facilitators, or

factors that encouraged the participation of children with Down syndrome in physical activities. The first facilitator that they found was the positive role of the family, both parents and siblings in the physical activity. It is no surprise that the study found that children who came from families with pro-active parents who enjoyed sports and fitness, as well as played an active role in the activity were more likely to participate in a physical activity. When the parents put in the time to seek out opportunities for their child, as well as the time to educate sports staff about their child's disability, their children participated more readily in the activity. The study also found that if the child had a sibling that participated in a physical activity, the disabled sibling was more motivated to do so as well (Barr & Shields, 2011).

The opportunity for social interactions with peers was found as the second facilitator for the children to participate in physical activities. Many children with Down syndrome are known to crave as well as enjoy social interactions with their peers. Due to this, the social interaction with peers was found to be a motivator for the children to want to participate and made it enjoyable for them to do so. Many parents saw that their children were highly motivated by the encouragement they got from their peers for their participation. They also liked that their children were able to emulate their peers by learning to follow their example in the activity, making it a powerful social learning experience (Barr & Shields, 2011).

The third facilitator identified was the availability of programs that make adaptations for children with Down syndrome. Parents felt that if specialized programs for Down syndrome children or mainstream programs able to make adaptations for their children were available, it helped to get their children involved. They believed that if the

activity was broken down into skills that were attainable for their child, they would be more motivated to participate. If the children were given the attention and guidance they needed to succeed, it would keep them engaged in the activity (Barr & Shields, 2011).

The fourth and final facilitator of participation in physical activities by Down syndrome children was the child's physical skills and personality traits. The children were more motivated to participate in an activity when they had the physical skills, coordination, and cognitive ability to do so. This made them believe that they could succeed in the given activity. Children who were optimistic, enthusiastic, and goal driven were also more likely to stick with the activity to meet their goals (Barr & Shields, 2011).

This study also found four factors that hindered participation of Down syndrome children in activities, which they called barriers. The characteristics or conditions commonly associated with Down syndrome were found to be a barrier for participation in physical activities. Individuals with Down syndrome often suffer from low muscle tone, congenital heart defects, and obesity, which prevent them from participating in physical activities. This can make it hard for the children to have the endurance needed for certain physical activities. Besides the evident physical limitations, children with Down syndrome often have communication impairments. These impairments make it hard to understand the rules and interpret the instructions needed to participate (Barr & Shields, 2011).

The second barrier identified in the study was the availability of the family to be involved in the physical activity with their child. Many parents said that they did not have the time to oversee the activity that their child was participating in. Having a child with Down syndrome often put not only a burden of time on the families, but a financial

one as well. Many parents also cited that they were too overprotective of their child, and did not want them to participate for fear of them being physically or emotionally hurt. So, without the time and finances needed to devote to the activity, or the overprotective nature of the parents, it was a struggle for their child to participate (Barr & Shields, 2011).

The reduced physical or behavioral skills commonly associated with Down syndrome also proved to be a barrier in this study. Many of the children simply lacked the motor skills or coordination needed for the physical activity. Parents also saw that as their children got older, the physical and cognitive gap between their children and their peers made it too hard for them to participate in an activity at the same level. Children with Down syndrome are typically very stubborn and get easily frustrated, which also hinders them in participation. The children would only participate if they enjoyed the activity. Finally, the study found that there was a general lack of accessible programs for their children to participate in. They found that there were not enough mainstream programs that were willing to let their Down syndrome child participate (Barr & Shields, 2011).

Overall, this study proved that there are many facilitators and barriers specifically associated with Down syndrome that either help or hinder participation of children in physical activities. I see many of the factors identified in this study in the student, that I will be studying. I find that many of the attributes associated with Down syndrome that he displays are actually positives when it comes to his participation in track and field. He is stubborn, but that means that he will never give up and keep trying until he gets the proper throwing technique down. He is very strong as compared to his peers, so he

should have no problem keeping up with his teammates. He is also blessed to have parents that get him involved in both mainstream and specialized sports programs, which benefits him immensely. Zach is also extremely social, which makes him crave the social interaction which makes his participation such a healthy experience for him. All in all, I see that Zachary's Down syndrome diagnosis provides him with many more facilitators than barriers. He is a child that believes in himself, and I will be there to coach him to make sure he achieves his goal.

In reading the previous article about the facilitators and barriers, it mentioned a similar study conducted in the United States. In this study titled "Parents' perceptions of health and physical activity needs of children with Down Syndrome" by Kristi Sayers, Menear, parents of Down Syndrome children from the age of preschool to young adult were interviewed about their opinions of the health and physical needs of their children. Although many of the findings were consistent with the previous article, as a middle school coach, I found that the parents of teenagers had interesting insights into the needs of the age group. Through her interviews of five mothers of five male teenagers with Down Syndrome, Menear found some interesting themes. First of all, all of the parents found that by the time their children were teenagers, they no longer wanted to participate in special needs activities, such as Special Olympics. They only wanted to participate in activities that allowed them to be included with their non-disabled peers. The teens also showed a strong interest in being with their friends, wanting to play sports, and wanting to be competitive with others. The parents also reported that at this age, their children's motor skills did not match their cognitive skills, and that they were much stronger than peers when competing in a special needs sports league. They wanted to play the sport

without modified rules, or with children much younger than them. In other words, the study found that the needs of Down syndrome teenagers were not too different than a typical teenager. They wanted to be able to compete with their friends without the need for specialized rules, and liked the challenge of doing so. The study also highlighted the importance of having a trained professional with the Down syndrome athletes as they compete, as to avoid misconceptions, and to promote inclusion (Menear, 2007).

This study showed me that as Zachary gets older, it is important for him to be treated the same as other teenagers, because he too will have the typical needs of a teen. Like the male teenagers included in this study, Zach is extremely strong when compared to other students with disabilities. Due to the fact that track and field is an individual sport, he will be able to challenge himself to be his best, while not having to have the same ability as his teammates. With me there as a trained special education teacher, I am sure he will have the support that he needs to succeed.

The final piece of literature I chose to review was the story of 23 year-old mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter Garrett Holeve, who has Down syndrome, which was featured on ESPN. His is true story of how his involvement in sports has had a profound effect on his life as well as those around him. From the time he was born, Garrett's parents have fought to ensure that their son had an "open playing field" in front of him, and that his disability would not get in the way of his dreams. His parents made sure that he was involved in as many mainstream sports and activities as he could be. Garrett truly wanted nothing more than to be included with his non-disabled peers. He wanted this so much that he did not want to be associated with or to be seen with other children with disabilities. He even said to his father "I don't want to be called Garrett, because Garrett

has Down syndrome. He's dead to me (Rinaldi, 2013).” He actually wanted to fight against the stigma attached to Down syndrome and prove that he could do what every other child could. Even with the cognitive ability of an 8 or 9 year old, who will probably live with his parents his whole life, Garrett believes that having Down Syndrome does not affect him, he chooses to ignore it and not let it limit what he can do. Garrett joined the MMA gym in 2010 after his dad challenged all of his sons to try it. Garrett was the only taker. He now spends six days a week there in training. His coach, his parents, and his mentor all believe that Garrett has found himself through fighting, in a way that most people do not experience in their lifetime. Despite others opinions of the dangers of stepping into the ring, Garrett expressed a desire to compete and his parents let him. Garrett does not give up in the ring; he keeps up with his opponents. Through hard work and determination, Garrett is now not only a fighter, but a MMA instructor for children. He has overcome others as well as his own stereotypes of people with Down syndrome and now sees himself as a role model for others (Rinaldi, 2013).

A co-worker sent me the link to Garrett's story a few months ago, and I could not help but to see the similarities that he has with the young man Zachary that I coach. Both Garrett and Zachary have the same fire within them. They both push themselves to succeed despite their disability. Their motivation comes from within, and are both given the opportunity to succeed by their supportive parents. This story is just one of many I have heard about individuals with Down syndrome overcoming obstacles, and makes me feel that including them in mainstream activities can only help them thrive.

After all of my research, I was able to find concrete evidence to support Zachary being included in the mainstream track and field team. It helped me to see that despite

his disability, an individual sport such as track can help him both physically and emotionally. Although I want to find out the specific impact that being on the team has on Zach, I am more interested to find how his participation on the team changes his non-disabled peers. Through my study, I hope to explore the greater impact that Zachary's participation has on the members of the team, as well as how it benefits him outside of practice.

Methodology

Participants

Participants of the study were the 6th, 7th, and 8th grade throwing team from the Readington Middle School track team. Twenty students, both male and female, participated in the initial survey about students with disabilities. I then selected a focus group of students, four male students and one female student from each of the three grades (13 students total) to complete an in depth interview. Zachary, my student with Down Syndrome and his parents also participated in the study,

Types of Data and Data Collection Procedures

To best determine how Zachary's presence on the throwing team for track impacted the attitudes and behaviors of himself and his peer athletes, I used a variety of data collection methods.

I began the study by interviewing my student with Down syndrome, Zachary to get some background information about his sports involvement, his feelings about participating in sports, and his goals for the upcoming track season. I also did check in interviews with

him throughout the season to find out how he is feeling about his progress throughout the season and his interactions with his peers.

Due to Zachary's limited ability to communicate, I asked his parents to complete a survey to explain Zachary's involvement in sports in school related programs and specialized programs for students with disabilities, as well as the benefits they saw to his participation. As the season progressed, I asked his parents to get additional information about what positive or negative changes they saw in Zachary.

I also conducted a survey of the entire throwing team to determine the peer athletes attitudes about students with disabilities and their involvement in sports. I then formed a focus group from the athletes on the throwing team to conduct more in-depth interviews about their thoughts and feelings about people with disabilities and Zach's involvement on the track team. The focus group consisted of a total of 13 students. Four boys were selected from each of the 6th, 7th, and 8th grades. One eighth grade female student was interviewed primarily because she has a brother with a severe disability and could provide deeper insight.

During practices and track meet, I conducted planned observations to see how Zach was interacting with his peers and coaches, and how the rest of the team was interacting with him. I also used field notes to collect data as needed. Finally, I wrote in my journal on a weekly basis throughout the study to keep note of what I was seeing as the teacher researcher.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Once the data in my study had been compiled, I began to code the interviews and surveys looking for similarities and differences amongst the responses from Zachary, his parents,

and his peer athletes. I then looked through the interview and survey answers to look for common themes and feelings expressed by the student participants. I used the interviews, observations, and field notes to what impact the inclusion of Zachary in mainstream sports impacted the feelings and attitudes of the peer athletes and himself throughout the track season.

Findings

The purpose of my study was to find out the effect that having a student with Down Syndrome on the track team would have on beliefs and attitudes of his non-disabled peers. Sub-questions that I investigated were: How to Zachary's parent's value sports? What impact does his involvement have on him at home? These questions led me to find out a lot about the team as a whole.

Parent Interview

Through the parent interview, I found that involvement in activities is of paramount importance to Zachary's family. They have always fought to have him included in as much as possible both academically and with extracurricular activities. In the parent survey, Zachary's mom and dad told me about all of his sports involvement both inside and out of school. This provided a lot of information about the scope of activities he is involved with as well as the different opportunities he has to interact with both his disabled and non-disabled peers.

Outside of school, his parents reported that Zach is involved in several specialized programs designed for students with special needs, such as Special Olympics Track and Field, Hunterdon Outreach Program soccer and basketball, and Hunterdon Challenger baseball. They heard about the programs through word of mouth and from other parents

of children with special needs. These specialized programs give Zach the chance to be with his similarly disabled peers once or twice per week depending on the season. His parents report that Zachary loves participating in these programs because it provides Zach a positive environment to interact with his disabled peers while developing his athletic and social skills.

Due to Zach's love of sports, his parents have also gotten him involved in many activities at Readington Middle School. In his transition IEP meeting to the middle school, they raised interest getting Zach more involved. One of his teachers introduced the idea of having him serve as the soccer manager. His success in this, led to him becoming the basketball manager and filming the girls basketball games. Based on his performance in the Special Olympics in the softball throw event, it was decided in 7th grade that Zachary would join the RMS Track Throwing Team to throw the shot put. This was the first opportunity he had to actually compete on the same team with his non-disabled peers. They reported that Zach loves to be a part of the team and to feel like he is contributing, instead of sitting on the sidelines. Both parents feel that he benefits immensely from being a part of the mainstream sports. They feel that it has provided Zach a positive environment to interact with his peer. More importantly, being a part of the track team has provided a platform for his peers to see what Zach is capable of in terms of athletic ability. They feel his participation has had a positive impact on Zach because he has been able to experience what a typical middle school student would experience through his involvement in school sports. They have seen that it has built his confidence regarding his abilities and allowed the opportunity for him to build friendships with his non-disabled peers.

Overall, his parents constantly expressed that they feel his involvement in sports both inside and out of school helps Zach in many ways. It provides him with the opportunity to build and develop his athletic abilities, as well as foster friendships with both his disabled and non-disabled peers. Most importantly, it gives him places to feel successful and to feel that he is contributing to a team and the school community.

Interview of Zachary

Being that he was the centerpiece of my study, I felt that it was important to interview Zachary himself. Zach is a very friendly and verbal young man, but often has a hard time expressing what he actually means or how he feels about a particular topic. Interviewing his parents was much more informative, but Zach enjoyed feeling a part of the research process and of course loved being the center of attention.

Zachary reported on the kinds of sports that he is involved with, which mirrored what his parents said. When I asked him about being on the track team, he was noticeably more excited than when he was talking about the other sports. He said that he is so happy each time he goes to track because he gets to see his friends. He also said that it makes him feel good to be on a Readington Middle School team just like his other students in the school. Zach also said that track was a good place to use up all of the energy that he has. He also said that he enjoyed spending time with his coaches, myself and Coach Meyer. This was typical of Zach because he always likes to flatter people. He set goals for his shot put throwing during the season of “throwing far” and “getting the grunt down”, meaning that he wanted to practice grunting while he threw because he felt it makes him throw farther. When I asked him what he could help others with, he

told me that he could help others with getting the proper form for throwing down, and teach others to be good sports by giving high fives and fist bumps.

Although I may not have been able to get a lot of information out of Zachary, I was able to learn that he really enjoys being part of the track team. His excitement was palpable, which warmed my heart. I also liked to hear that he felt confident enough to teach others. This proved that being on the track team is definitely a valuable experience.

Student Surveys

All students on the throwing team agreed to take a survey entitled “Survey on Beliefs about Students with Disabilities”. The survey was given to find out general information about how the students felt about students with disabilities. The survey was comprised of twelve statements that the students had to give their opinion of by marking: strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree. All of the students were more than willing to participate, and several even wrote down their names on the survey for me to contact them if I had any other questions. This showed that some of the students were very sensitive and caring about the topic.

I had assumed going into to the survey that middle school students, who typically care about nothing but their cell phone and friends, would have little opinion about this topic. I was happy to find that the surveys proved me wrong.

The students had many different perceptions of people with disabilities and the way that they should be treated. The survey showed that most students felt that people with disabilities were easier to get along with than other people. They also felt strongly that people with disabilities do not feel sorry for themselves and that they are just as happy as their regular peers. Most agreed that people with disabilities are just the same as

everyone else. The students also reported that disabled people did not like to keep to themselves, they enjoyed being around other people. All of the students said that they felt strongly that people with disabilities should be treated the same as people without disabilities and that they should be included with their regular peers as much as possible.

The other half of the survey asked students to respond to questions directly related to the purpose of my study, the inclusion of people with disabilities in sports. All but one student agreed that sports should be competitive, but when it came to athletes with disabilities, their feelings seemed to contradict this. Although most school sports teams are competitive and do not promote inclusion, all of those surveyed believed that students with special needs should be able to participate in any sport, and that there should not be special sports teams for those that are disabled. Most interestingly, more than half of the participants felt that people with disabilities should not be expected to meet the same standards in sports as people without disabilities, despite them previously reporting that they should be treated the same as everyone else.

Overall, the survey showed that the students felt that people with disabilities should be treated the same and given the same opportunities as their non-disabled peers, but when it came to sports they should not be held to the same standard. I hoped that the student athlete interviews would shed more light on their true feelings about having a person with a disability such as Zachary on the throwing team.

Student Athlete Interviews

For a focus group interview, I chose ten student athletes from the throwing team to participate in one on one interviews with me. The sample included three sixth grade males, three 7th grade males, and four 8th graders, three male and one female. A majority

of the students were happy to participate, a few were shy and offered little information in their answers. The interviews provided me with a lot of insight into how the students truly felt about being around people with disabilities and are the benefits to doing so.

When asked how much experience the students had with people with disabilities, most of the students said that they had students with disabilities included in their middle school classes such as gym, art, music, and financial literacy. Two of the students also reported volunteering with programs such as Hunterdon Outreach, a sports program for people with disabilities, which Zachary participates in throughout the year. I was surprised to find out that three of the students had had a personal connection with Zach for many years. One of the 7th grade boys told me that his mom used to babysit Zach daily from third through fifth grade in their home. He seemed to have some fond memories of playing and interacting with Zach during that time. Two of the 8th graders told me that they had been in the YMCA sponsored aftercare program with Zach since 4th grade, so they spent time with him afterschool daily for a number of years. These two boys also volunteered to work in class with Zachary in both the intermediate and middle schools. The female 8th grader, which I chose to interview has an eleven year old brother with multiple disabilities. Her brother, Patrick, is unable to walk or talk, and goes to the Matheny School for the severely disabled. I felt that her experience living with a person with disabilities, would give me some good insight for my study.

Next, the athletes were asked how being around people with disabilities made them feel. Most of the students reported that they did not mind being around disabled people, and they felt comfortable around them. One of the eighth graders said that when he first meets someone with a disability, he is nervous to be around them because he does

not know what to expect, but once he gets to know them, it becomes comfortable and easy. Two students reported that they had empathy for people with disabilities because they realize that they cannot always do everything they want to do and things are harder for them because of their disability. Catherine, the young woman with a disabled brother offered the most insight. She said that it “opens your eyes and gives you a new perspective to be around people with disabilities. It’s nice to see how happy they always are, because they never see the negative side of things. It really shows you how fortunate you are to have good health and wellbeing.”

Next, the students were asked if they treat people with disabilities differently than their non-disabled peers. Most reported that they treat everyone the same, but upon further explanation, said that they treat people with disabilities with more respect. A few noted that they definitely watch what they say a little more when they are around different types of people so that they can make sure they do not upset or confuse them. Two students also reported that they joke more with their friends, but try to be supportive, considerate and conscious of their needs with people like Zachary. One student related his answer to sports, saying that he is rougher with his friends in sports, because he would not want to hurt someone with a disability. Overall, the students all seemed conscious of their actions around people with disabilities, and were looking to treat them the same or with more respect than their non-disabled peers.

Finally, the students were asked if people with disabilities, specifically Zachary benefit from being around people their own age without disabilities, and vice versa. Overwhelming, the students agreed that Zach benefited from being around his non-disabled peers. They all felt that it gave him the chance to feel pride in being included on

the team. Most said that it would be good for Zach to find good role models for behavior, and to learn new vocabulary and social skills from his peers. A few of the students felt that it would be good for Zach to see how the real world is and to learn to cope with people treating him differently. Only one student hoped that Zach would make new friends with his non-disabled peers.

When it came to how people without disabilities benefit from being around people without disabilities, all of the students felt that there were definite benefits. Many thought that it taught them to be more aware and tolerant of different types of people. They also felt that being around them helps to open their eyes and show how lucky they are to not have a disability. Finally, one young man said that when he is around someone like Zach, he has learned that even though people are different, they can be like anyone else and become friends.

Through the interviews, it was nice to see that the students more aware of people with disabilities around them, then one might think. Now it was time to see if their words matched their actions as the track season progressed.

Journals

Now that the initial interviews and surveys of the students were done, it was time to start observing the interactions between Zachary and his regular education peer athletes and what effects it had on their behaviors and attitudes.

Effect on Peer Athletes

For the first few days of practice, I noticed that many of the students on the team were ignoring Zachary. As his personal coach, I decided to push for his inclusion a little more, to see if it would help foster relationships between him and his peers. One of the

major ways I did this was during warm-ups. In their lines, the students did what was known as San Jose's. These were a set of specific warm-ups that had movements to mimic those made in running with proper form. I noticed right away that Zachary was not doing any of the movements correctly. With the help of the other coach, I picked a fellow 8th grade student to be Zach's buddy for warm-ups. The boy was one of the students who knows Zach well from his time in aftercare. The boy, Noah, took Zach under his wing right away. I watched as he made sure that Zach was doing each of the movements right and at the same speed as his teammates. He was patient and kind and praised Zach for his effort at all times. He also made sure that each teammate in his line high fived Zach as he finished each of the drills. It was really heartwarming to watch. Noah singlehandedly helped Zach to fit in with his peers and be accepted instead of looking like the outcast.

I watched the team interact with each other throughout the season. The 8th graders are a group of highly competitive boys, who are constantly trying to outdo each other in their throwing distances. When they were throwing whether it was at practice or a meet, they would constantly be making fun of each other when they threw poorly, or trying to make each other mess up so that another teammate could come out on top. While they did praise each other when they were throwing well, the rest of the time they acted like typical teenage boys. I saw this change as their interactions with Zachary increased. As the other coach and I pushed Zach towards his same aged peers, the boys' behavior began to change. They took note of the times that Zach was acting silly and not concentrating on his throwing, and took the time to give him gentle reminders to calm down and listen. Instead of making fun, like they did with each other, when Zach threw

they praised him for his good work and made sure to show good sportsmanship by high fiving and fist pounding. By the end of the season, Zach was the only thrower that the team consistently watched and cheered for at meets. They even gave him reminders about his throwing form when they saw he was forgetting the basics. Despite them telling me in the one on one interviews that they did not treat people with disabilities any differently than their peers, I saw the complete opposite as the season progressed. The boys were very aware of when Zach was around and changed their behavior to be more kind, compassionate, and understanding. I could tell they were trying to encourage Zach to be the best that he could be while being good role models.

Effect on Zachary's behavior

I have been Zachary's teacher for many years in the classroom. He is a very silly, fun-loving, and competitive boy. In class he sometimes has a hard time focusing, is always looking for attention, and enjoys interacting with his teachers and peers. In the beginning of the study, I was interested to see if I would notice these same behaviors in Zach during the track season.

In the beginning of the season, I noticed right away that Zach tended to gravitate toward the 6th graders during practice, instead of his 8th grade peers. He was silly and unfocused during warm-ups and practice. He was very physical, constantly trying to touch and roughhouse with his teammates. Zach seemed to be looking for his peers to like him by joking with them and acting silly. He also seemed very cocky about his throwing ability, and would often not listen to the throwing coach, as he was constantly assuring everyone that he did not need help.

As the season went on, I began to observe a change in Zachary. With the help of his peer buddy during warm ups, he began to try much harder right from the beginning of practice each day. He began to gravitate towards the 8th graders during practice once they started to help him more with his form. He started to be more open about taking suggestions from his coach on how to improve his form. Once Zach began to show improvement, he became more confident and focused during practice. This was particularly evident one day when he noticed that one of the 6th graders was throwing the shot put like a baseball, which can lead to injury. Zach took note and notified the coach of what happened. The coach praised Zach and asked him to work with the boy to show him how to throw the shot put properly. The boy listened and worked with Zach to improve his throw for the rest of practice that day. I had never seen Zach's face light up so much to be helping others instead of being the one who was helped. I could see that Zach was constantly looking at his peers to see how to act. He was starting to learn to wait patiently in line like his teammates and to keep his hands to himself. He also led the entire team to cheer for others, encouraging high fives, fist pounds, and pats on the back.

The change in Zachary's behavior from the beginning to the midway of the season was remarkable. He truly benefited greatly from being around his regular education peers. In addition to all he learned about the skills associated with throwing shot put, he was able to learn appropriate social skills from his role model peers, while feeling confident enough to teach others at the same time.

Implications

Middle school is a time of great change for teenagers. They are starting to come into their own and learning how to be comfortable in their own skin. They are searching for acceptance from their peers and the adults that they interact with on a daily basis. They are often moody and can be cruel to others. During this time, it is important for all teens to get involved and explore sports and activities to find where their true passion lies. This may be easier for a typically developing teen, but for a disabled teen, it is a struggle to find an activity that fits their needs.

My study focused on how a student with Down Syndrome being on a mainstream track team would change the beliefs and attitudes of his regular education peers. I knew going into the study that Zachary had changed my life in so many positive ways over the few years I had known him. I was curious to see if he would have the same effect on others. I found that without a doubt, Zachary being a member of the track team, did have an overwhelmingly positive effect on not only his peers but on himself as well.

Through my research, I was able to find out from both Zach and his parents that they value him being involved in all types of activities with his disabled and non-disabled peers. They place a high importance on fighting stereotypes associated with having a disability such as Down Syndrome. His parents' beliefs made it much easier for Zach to become involved in mainstream sports. He might not be on par with his peers academically, but his athletic ability has opened the door for him to compete on the same level with his peers.

In conducting my research, I also learned that the teens that I surveyed and interviewed did not have the negative opinion about people with disabilities which I

expected them to have. They all believed that their disabled peers should be treated the same and included with their peers as much as possible. This gave me more faith that many teenagers have good hearts even though they do not always show it.

The effect that Zachary's inclusion on the mainstream team had on his own behavior as well as the behavior of his peers was staggering. He was able to compete on an even playing field with his peers, showing them that despite the fact that he has Down Syndrome, he was able to throw just as far, if not farther than others. This built his confidence, and allowed him the opportunity to contribute to the team and feel a part of the school community. Most importantly, he learned to look to his peers to be role models for good behavior. While on the team, he learned to manage his silly, off task behavior to become a more focused member of the team. He learned age appropriate social skills and was able to fit in with his peers, which did wonders for his self-esteem. He was also able to teach his teammates the importance of cheering for others and showing good sportsmanship.

Zachary's peers, particular the group of 8th grade throwers, transformed throughout the season as well. They learned quickly that they were role models to Zach. They learned to stop goofing around and being mean towards others in front of him, because they wanted him to model good, not negative behavior. They learned to think before they acted. They became peer coaches to Zach, which built their confidence in their abilities. By becoming more focused, they were able to make practice a positive place where they could focus on building their skills and becoming better teammates to each other.

Overall, I learned that if students work together with people with different ability levels, they will learn to adapt. If given the chance, disabled and non-disabled peers can break down the walls of stereotypes and learn from each other, without even knowing it.

Limitations/Subjectivity

Although my study was successful and proved that Zachary's presence on the track team impacted both his and others behaviors, I did encounter a few limitations. The first of the limitations was the six week timeline for research. This timeframe did not allow me to collect data for the entire track season, which was twelve weeks long. If I had had a longer amount of time for data collection, I could have produced a much more in depth study. I could have planned for secondary interviews of the parents, as well as more focus group interviews which would have yielded more information.

Secondly, I was unable to conduct the research on my own timeline. Due to the fact that I was only the special education coach on the team, I was at the mercy of the other coaches. I had to plan with the throwing coach to be able to survey and interview the student athletes. This meant that conducting the surveys and interviews took longer than expected because they had to be worked in around the schedule that he had already set for practice for the day. It left little time for additional research.

Due to Zachary's limited ability to communicate, I was unable to get as much valuable data from him in his own words as I would have liked. I had to rely on his parents for the information that I needed. I was able to record a lot of data through observations, but I would have liked to have been able to ask Zach how certain situations and teammates made him feel.

I also feel that if someone else had conducted the interviews, they may have gotten more insightful information. The students on the team knew that I am Zachary's teacher in addition to his coach and know that I am very protective of him. Although I constantly reassured them that they could be open and honest, I often wondered if the students were not being truthful with their answers in order to avoid upsetting me or making me think badly of them.

I found it hard to be subjective while conducting my research. Being a special educator, I am extremely passionate about my job and the students that I teach. I am always looking out for them. It is hard for me to take my feelings out of anything that I do. Although I tried my best to be subjective, I wonder if the results would have come out differently if I had chosen a topic that did not relate to special education students.

Emerging Questions

After conducting this study, there are still several questions that I would like to investigate. Does a child with a disability being included academically in the mainstream class, as opposed to mainstream sports, have similar effects on their non-disabled peers? How do disabled students themselves feel about being included in mainstream activities? These additional questions would give me further insight about the inclusion model at our school. It would be interesting to see how both non-disabled peers and disabled peers feel about being taught in the same academic setting and if there is as many positive outcomes as I found by including Zachary in a non-academic setting.

Conclusion

The results of this study have a great impact on me as a special educator. Since I began my career as a special educator, I have always believed that my students should be

given every opportunity to showcase their talents and build their skills no matter what their disability may be. I have always fought for what was best for my students both academically and socially. This is one of the main reasons why I fought to get Zachary involved in sports at Readington Middle School. I knew that if he was given the opportunity to showcase his athletic talents, he would shine. His personality is one that makes him magnetic to be around. My hope was that his peers would get the chance to get to know him and be able to see what he is capable of athletically. The positive impact that his inclusion had on both himself and his teammates proves that my belief is right. Inclusion in sports does promote positive interaction between disabled and non-disabled peers. I now feel validated knowing what I have been fighting for is right and excited for the possibilities for inclusion I can find for some of my other students.

I feel that my study could be useful especially to coaches. It shows that sports teams do not always have to have the best players on the team and be super competitive to be valuable. There are so many things that students can learn from being included on a sports team that are not athletic such as building social skills, fostering acceptance, building confidence, and learning to be a good sport. Although I understand that many coaches feel the need to have a winning season, it is my hope that they may be able to see the benefits of including children that struggle socially or have a disability could have.

Implementation Plan

I plan on sharing the results of my study with the following people, Zachary's parents and the Director of Special Services at my school. In conveying the results of the study to Zach's parents, I hope to show them how much of an impact his inclusion had on his teammates as well as on his own behavior. I think that this will also give them validation

as to why it is important to keep him involved in mainstream sports once he moves onto high school next year. I also plan to bring the results to my boss, the Director of Special Services to show her the positive impact the sports program had on this group of students. Hopefully my study will open the door for other disabled students to be included in sports and activities in the future.

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