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Peer Support and Inclusion for Individuals with Disabilities:

Benefits for Everyone

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The discussion of whether inclusion in general education classrooms is the best scenario for students with disabilities is an ongoing debate around the pros and cons of inclusion and separation. While determining the least restrictive environment for each student sometimes includes partial or full time inclusion in a general education classroom, some students require more time and attention than is available in general education classrooms (Heward, 2013). To determining the least restrictive environment the services each individual requires, the academic curriculum, and the students' academic ability must be taken into consideration.

However, much of the support for more inclusion in schools and programs is the benefit that comes to students with disabilities from interacting with typically developing peers (McCurdy & Cole, 2014). Unfortunately, new research has shown that many students are not being placed in their least restrictive environment, with many students being unnecessarily placed in segregated classrooms or schools (Kurth et al., 2014). This placement restricts these students from the social opportunities presented in the general education program. In order for inclusion to be effective, it must extend beyond classroom walls and into the community as well. The increased opportunity for appropriate social interactions is essential for individuals with disabilities who often struggle with social skills. Peer support and interaction can have significant, positive impacts on the lives of individuals with disabilities (Carter & Hughes, 2005). However, in order for these significant effects to occur, more social interactions between individuals with disabilities and typically developing individuals need to occur.

Lack of initiation of social interactions by typically developing individuals may stem from a lack of education about the importance of these interactions. Peer supports and interactions allow individuals with disabilities to refine social skills, participate in peer activities, build relationships, and learn social norms (Carter & Hughes, 2005). Peer support programs

allow typically developing individuals to assist individuals with disabilities in learning how to interact with the community and with other people. Inclusive settings also create potential gains in communication, social skills and adaptive behavior skills for individuals with disabilities (McCurdy & Cole, 2014). When students with disabilities are given the opportunity to interact with others, it increases their self-confidence as well as their ability to succeed in school and post-school adjustments. Peer interaction has shown to benefit individuals with disabilities in permanent, positive, life-changing ways.

While it is clear that students with disabilities benefit from peer interactions in many different ways, these students are not the only ones who receive life-changing benefits. Students without disabilities also benefit highly from interacting and working with students with disabilities. Interacting with individuals with disabilities may be challenging at times, but the benefits far outweigh the difficulties. Respect, preparation for an inclusive society, understanding of differences and diversity, and opportunities to master and teach activities are just some of the benefits students without disabilities receive when peer supports are planned and implemented properly (Riester-Wood, 2015).

I am blessed to say that I have personally experienced many benefits in my own life after working with both students and adults with disabilities. While research speaks volumes about the potential positive outcomes of interacting with individuals with disabilities, there is nothing that proves the data more truly than personal experience. I have been able to interact with students and adults with disabilities in a peer support classroom, volunteering at a non-profit organization that provides horse therapy to students with special needs and working for a non-profit organization that provides skill building and community living support programs to individuals with special needs. My role in all of these experiences was to provide support to these

individuals, sometimes one-on-one and other times in a group setting. All of these experiences have helped mold me as a person, enhanced many of my skills and helped me to develop several positive characteristics.

Respect

Working with students with disabilities has taught me respect in many different ways, including respect for individuals as well as respect for their disabilities. One of the biggest lessons of respect came while I was working with an individual in the community living support program. The individual was wheel chair bound and needed assistance using the restroom via a urinal container and colostomy bag. I was not expecting to have to help an individual in this way and initially felt extremely uncomfortable. However, I decided to put myself in his shoes. I could not imagine what it would be like to require someone to assist you to use the bathroom in that way, especially when you barely know the person. I also thought about how would I want someone to treat my brother, father or friend if they were in this situation. From that moment forward, I put my personal feelings aside and chose to treat him with dignity and respect, because that is what he deserved.

Flexibility

One of the more challenging skills that was necessary to develop while providing support to individuals with disabilities was flexibility. Throughout my life I have functioned on planned schedules and organization. I would make lists and time frames of everything to be done and if the schedule did not go as planned I would experience a lot of stress and anxiety. Thankfully, working with students and adults with disabilities has taught me to be flexible. The reality is, I never know what the day is going to bring. While it is important to have a plan, it is also important to learn how to adjust that plan based on the unexpected events of the day. Some days

would go as planned, but sometimes the student had an unexpected problem or a bad day. I had to learn to be willing to alter my plan to best assist and support the student. I learned that flexibility decreases my stress and usually leads to more success than trying to force everything into a pre-planned schedule.

Patience

Learning to be more flexible also required patience. An individual with a disability may require repeated instruction or more detail for how to complete a task. It may take them longer or they may not finish the task the correct way. Working in the skill building program taught me how to be patient with someone while they finished the assigned task the best way they knew how. It also taught me patience in situations where the individuals were distracted or upset by something I thought to be irrational. Assisting individuals with disabilities taught me patience for when something did not go the way I planned for it to go. I have been able to apply this patience in other areas of my life such as work and school.

Appreciation of Differences

The concept of everyone being different rings even more true among individuals with disabilities. Even among two individuals that receive the same diagnosis, the symptoms and characteristics may express themselves very differently (Heward, 2013). My experiences with many individuals with disabilities has broadened my appreciation and understanding of individual differences. It has taught me to take time to get to know all people who I interact with to understand their personalities and the way their minds work. Working with individuals with disabilities taught me to observe and be aware of individual triggers and frustrations as well as pleasures and enjoyments. It has taught me to be appreciative of the different ways people view the world, not only due to a disability, but also due to factors such as culture, upbringing or

religion. Supporting individuals with disabilities has taught me to be sensitive in all conversations and interactions. It has also taught me that individual differences among all people should be expected and admired. Most importantly, it cultivated an awareness of individual differences in every area of my life.

Meaningful Friendships

Not only did the students and adults I worked with build relationships amongst others in the programs they were involved in, but also with me. In high school, I worked with a student who currently works in my home town grocery store. Whenever I see him, he runs up to me with a huge smile on his face and gives me a hug. In high school, I made a point to acknowledge and include him in activities and conversations outside of our normal class period. I would also correct and encourage him when he would do or say something socially inappropriate. I helped him with his school work and also pushed him to do his best. He respected me as a mentor but considered me a friend. It is heartwarming that even after all these years that friendship still exists.

Another friendship I established was with an individual I worked with through the community living support program. Even now, I am still able to contact his family to check in on them and visit their home. This individual is intelligent and thoughtful. We spent a lot of time together getting to know each other and encouraging each other's' goals and dreams. He introduced me to places I had never seen before and we also went on adventures to places neither of us had seen before. He is polite and friendly, and my other friends enjoyed when he would be around. This individual lit up my life in many ways and I will always be thankful for that.

Joy

There is no comparison to the joy I felt in my heart when one of the individuals I worked with accomplished something they had been working so hard towards. One of the most joyful experiences was while working with the students and the horses. The first week there was one student who was absolutely terrified of the horses. She could not walk into the barn without screaming and crying. However, slowly but surely, she began to get more comfortable, starting with simply petting the horses while I held her hand. By the sixth week, she was riding the horses with a huge smile on her face. She was even telling the horse to go faster. She experienced such freedom, excitement and independence that day. She grew so much in her confidence and her fear was completely diminished. However, she was not the only one that experienced joy that day. The joy in my heart watching this little girl confidently riding a horse with little assistance from me is unexplainable. I was so proud of her and it still blesses me to this day to know that I was able to assist her in building that confidence.

How to Teach and be Taught

Being a peer tutor in high school required me to be able to teach, clarify and explain the instruction to the students. I often had to give spelling tests or assist with math and reading lessons. I had to learn how to challenge the students to push themselves and also to help them without giving away the answers. I had to learn how to ask questions that would stimulate their thinking but keep them from getting frustrated. I also had to learn to be open and willing to be taught how to do these things. I learned from other tutors, mentors and teachers how to best explain the material to my peer tutees. I also had to be taught how to correct social behaviors without degrading or reprimanding the students. In addition, I had to learn how to teach daily living activities, such as counting money or washing your hands. I had to take tasks that seemed

so thoughtless to me and break them down into understandable steps. This is a lesson I will be able to take with me into my own classrooms and even use as a mother one day.

My personal experiences illustrate just some of the benefits that come for working with individuals with disabilities. I have learned that anyone can positively impact the life of another person if they simply take advantage of the opportunity to do so. The next step is to continue to develop methods and approaches that best perform inclusion in an effective and appropriate way, such as implementing peer supports as a means of creating environments where interactions between students can occur.

Peer supports can be one of the most powerful resources for helping individuals with disabilities to be successful (Riester-Wood, 2015). New research is beginning to explore the best and most effective ways to use peer supports to meet the academic and social needs of students with and without disabilities. One method is collaborative learning, which allows a group of students to work together to review and practice the taught material (Heward, 2013). Another is cross-age peer support, which involves older students mentoring or tutoring younger students. Finally, peer modeling is used throughout school systems as a way for peers to clarify lessons or instructions as well as provide social cues (Riester-Wood, 2015). These three methods, if implemented individually and appropriately, can help inclusion and peer supports be successful in the classroom.

Due to research on the benefits of peer modeling and interaction for students with and without disabilities, school systems are searching for ways to allow their students with disabilities to experience inclusion. In Michigan, students with disabilities may be educated to age 26. Many intermediate school districts have community based instruction programs for students age 19 to 26. There are also Center-based, or separate schools, that may be available

among the intermediate school districts for students with the most significant disabilities. One public school center based program recognized the lack of peer modeling among their students. The teacher in a classroom of students age 18 – 21 developed a peer-to-peer program with one of the other public high schools in the area. The teacher went into the high school and taught the typically developing students about the importance of peer modeling and asked for students to volunteer to be involved in the program. The students at the center based program then went to the high school for 1 class, 3 days a week, with their paired peer mentor. While it is difficult to generate data on what the students with disabilities may be learning in the classroom, the teacher saw improvements in communication and social skills among her students. The teacher then surveyed the peer mentors who all expressed enjoying the peer mentor program and wanting to participate again the following year.

High school students are not the only students being given these opportunities. A public school transition program for students ages 18 – 21 has partnered with a nearby university in order to encourage peer modeling and interaction as well. The students from the transition program attend the university 3 days a week to participate in a peer-lead physical education class. This class is specifically designed for helping university students have a better understanding of working with individuals with disabilities. The transition program also partners with the same university for a best buddies program that takes part in the community outside of school hours. Both of these programs give both students with and without disabilities the opportunity to interact with one another. The transition program students are learning to stay active as well as developing social skills while the university students are given the opportunity to teach physical health and build relationships. It is so inspiring to see the benefits of inclusion happening among the college age group.

Despite the fact that little research shows the benefits of segregated settings while current research indicates inclusive experiences are a critical predictor of positive outcomes in and out of school, restrictive placements of students with disabilities are still occurring (Kurth et al., 2014). It is so important and beneficial for students with and without disabilities to be allowed opportunities to interact with each other in both classroom and community settings. There are endless possibilities for substantial impacts to occur for both groups. My life has been shaped by my experiences with individuals with disabilities and I am so thankful for those opportunities. If more people can be aware of the benefits that are available to them through these experiences, I think the potential positive effects for everyone involved will be limitless.

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