Social Inclusion in the Lunchroom and on the Playground at School

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Abstract

Given the amount of time many students with and without disabilities spend together in schools, they are ideal settings to teach social skills and cultivate emotional well-being. This article features two inclusive recreation program models that can be adopted by schools to support social outcomes during the school day. The first program describes the use of "lunch bunches" that bring students with and without disabilities together to share lunch and recreational activity. The second describes a playground inclusion program where trained inclusion advocates help all children succeed during recess. The article concludes with discussion and recommendations related to supporting socio-emotional learning in schools.

Keywords: social inclusion, inclusion advocate, school-based services, social skills, playground, recess, lunchroom

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Learning to interact socially and manage emotions in healthy ways is essential for our well-being and quality of life (Anderson & Heyne, 2012; Montie & Abery, 2011). Positive social interaction promotes the formation of identity, a sense of self and others, communication and relationship skills, friendship development, and a feeling of community belonging (Amado, 1993; Freiler, 2003; Green & Heyne, 1997; Heyne, Schleien, & McAvoy, 1993). In fact, social relationships are the primary source of most people's happiness and the key ingredient to a life well-lived (Fredrickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2008; Seligman, 2003).

On a societal scale, *social capital*, or "the connections and relationships that develop around community and the value these relationships hold for the members" (Condeluci, 2002, p. 13), increases tolerance, fosters the collective resolution of problems, and expands awareness of the many ways community members are linked. Social interaction is the fabric that binds us together as a society and through which our individual and collective values and aspirations are realized.

Socialization is vital for young people as they discover who they are and their place in the world in relation to others. Learning to engage socially is crucial for all young people, but particularly for those with disabilities (Anderson & Heyne, 2012; Montie & Abery, 2011). Compared to their peers without disabilities, youngsters with disabilities are more likely to face social exclusion, encounter bullying, and be less involved in extracurricular activities (Harris, 2009; Montie & Abery, 2011; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). People with disabilities also tend to have fewer friends and a limited social network that revolves around family, service providers, and others with disabilities (Amado, 1993; Green & Heyne, 1997).

Given the amount of time many students with and without disabilities spend together in school, it is an ideal setting to teach social skills and cultivate emotional well-being (Heyne & Anderson, 2011). Yet, because of the necessity to focus on academic learning outcomes, schools are often too stretched to also meet students' social and emotional needs. Based on a synthesis of research and practice findings, however, a proactive approach to education calls for the development of positive school environments that address *both* academic and social-emotional learning (Adelman & Taylor, 2010; Cohen & Geier, 2010; Taylor & Adelman, 2011). Research has shown that social behavior and academic performance are strongly linked, and positive social behaviors in the classroom are predictive of positive academic achievement (Haynes, Ben-Avie, & Ensign, 2003; Malecki & Elliott, 2002; Welsh, Park, Widaman, & O'Neil, 2001). As a case in point, a meta-analysis of school-based programs designed to improve social and emotional development indicated an overall 11% gain in academic performance (Durlak, Weissbert, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). Thus, it is highly advantageous that all students receive instruction related to socio-emotional well-being.

The field of therapeutic recreation has a proven history of facilitating supportive inclusive environments whereby individuals with disabilities can learn social behaviors consistent with cultural norms (Anderson & Heyne, 2012; Anderson & Kress, 2003; Anderson, Penney McGee, & Wilkins, 2010; Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligman, 1997; Heyne, 2006; Heyne,

Schleien, & McAvoy, 1993; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997). The opportunity to socialize is arguably the most common reason people take part in recreational activities. Thus recreation is an ideal, culturally relevant environment to focus on social learning. School-based inclusive recreation that is implemented on a regular basis is an especially powerful tool for teaching and reinforcing socio-emotional development among students (Heyne & Anderson, 2011).

This article features two inclusive recreation program models that can be adopted by schools to support social outcomes during the school day. The first program describes the use of "lunch bunches" that bring students with and without disabilities together to share lunch and recreational activity. The second describes a playground inclusion program where trained advocates help all children be socially included during recess. The article concludes with discussion and recommendations related to supporting socio-emotional learning in schools.

The Lunchroom:
Facilitating Lunch Bunches to Encourage Socialization and Friendship

Lunchtime can be a source of anxiety for students with disabilities, as it can be for any student: *Where will I sit? With whom will I sit? Will I make friends?* Sometimes the student has little choice in these matters. If she needs assistance eating, her lunch companion will probably be the classroom aide. And, unless lunch groups are structured for social interaction between students with and without disabilities, social interaction isn't likely to occur. Yet lunchtime also offers an optimal occasion for socialization, fun, and friendship. It presents a regularly scheduled opportunity to make the most of a naturally occurring non-academic period for socio-emotional learning.

The lunch bunch program grew out of a federal grant project from the U.S. Department of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (Heyne, Schleien, & McAvoy, 1993). The purpose of the program was to explore the nature of relationships and friendships between elementary-age children with and without disabilities, what prevented friendships from developing, and what encouraged and sustained them. As part of the program, children with and without disabilities participated in school-based recreational activities together, including lunch bunches, over 2 academic years.

The lunch period was recognized by school staff as a time when students with disabilities particularly needed support. They usually sat alone or with an aide in the cafeteria, apart from their classmates without disabilities even though they were usually educated together in inclusive classrooms. On the advice of classroom teachers, groups of four or five students from the same classroom were formed, including one student with a disability. To recruit participants, teachers asked students without disabilities, who appeared to already like and interact with the student with a disability, if they would like to participate in the lunch bunch. Unanimously, the students said "Yes!" This process revealed a new insight: When familiar and interested students without disabilities are invited to recreate with a classmate with a disability, more likely than not they will readily agree. If they had been assigned to a group rather than asked, the lunch bunches would have probably felt contrived. They also may not have run so successfully or lasted the full duration of the grant project and beyond.

Lunch Bunch Structure

Lunch bunches met regularly once a week for approximately 45 minutes. Groups were facilitated by graduate research assistants associated with the grant project. While most schools will not have access to grant-supported students to lead groups, schools can partner with local colleges and universities to recruit undergraduate or graduate students. Students in higher education often seek volunteer opportunities, and service learning requirements are common for many degree programs. Schools could approach departments such as therapeutic recreation, special and regular education, educational psychology, and social work, where fieldwork experiences are highly valued. Sororities, fraternities, and student clubs often seek out community service projects and can be another good resource for group leaders. Volunteers may also be recruited from the community (e.g., school parents, retirees, civic groups) to lead lunch bunches on a regular or rotating schedule. In fact, when the grant project ended, lunch bunches were continued by the parents of the participants.

Lunch bunches began with children sharing conversation over boxed lunches they brought from home, followed by participation in a recreational activity. The group facilitator provided activities for the younger students; the older groups usually preferred to decide activities for themselves, which had the benefit of instant buy-in. Activities included baking cookies, making smoothies, puppetry, gardening, arts and crafts projects, flying remote control airplanes, basketball, and free gym time, to name a few. There are many types of recreational activities from which an adult facilitator may choose, including hobbies, art, theater, music, sports, nature-based activities, board and table games, physical exercise, cooperative games, horticulture, meditation, yoga, and martial arts.

Guidelines for Promoting Social Interaction

Several factors are important to consider when planning for small group interaction: group size, setting, recreational interests of the participants, nature and appropriateness of the activity, abilities and personalities of group members, and group dynamics. The following guidelines emerged from recommendations by project staff who ran the lunch bunches over the 2-year grant period. While these guidelines cannot guarantee friendships will occur, they can set the stage for positive social interactions among children whereby friendships can take root and grow.

❑ *Develop a lesson plan.*
As basic as this guideline may sound, the importance of having a well-laid plan for the use of group time bears emphasizing. If relationships aren't yet formed and flowing well, and if unstructured time remains at the end of an activity, the first participant to be left out will invariably be the one with a disability.
Once children know each other and mutual interaction is established, free time will be an asset for allowing relationships to develop naturally. In the meantime, group leaders will want to carry a "bag of tricks" of back-up activities to keep the children interested and engaged. Activities might include a selection of impromptu games, jokes, puzzles, cards, conversation topics, or favorite activities the students suggest.

❑ *Select an appropriate setting and room arrangement.*
School space is often at a premium and so it was during the grant project. Sometimes the only space available was a storage closet! Surprisingly, this environment proved perfect for facilitating lunch bunches. Small intimate spaces allow students to sit close together, which is conducive to sparking conversation, interaction, and playing table games. Sitting children in a circle, on the floor or around a table, also helps

students see and hear each other, which aids communication and provides equal opportunities for socialization. Inviting a student with a disability to sit next to students without disabilities (rather than an adult) also maximizes the odds that peer interaction will occur.

❑ *Set the tone for positive conduct.*
To ensure safety, large play groups often require group leaders to set rules from the onset. However, imposing rules too soon for small groups can limit children's playfulness, hamper their creativity, and prevent a sense of group ownership. A facilitator can foster a congenial atmosphere by emphasizing that the children are there to "have fun" and "make friends," not to "win" or be "first" or "best." The adult leader can observe group dynamics and step in as needed to support interactions that are positive, respectful, supportive, and safe. Group leaders can also encourage students to listen to each other (especially if a student requires more time to talk), take turns and share, respect each other's belongings, and provide positive feedback when someone has done something well. If stricter guidelines for conduct are

needed, facilitators can involve the children in rule-making and they will be more apt to accept and follow them.

❑ *Select activities that encourage cooperation.*

To encourage socialization and teamwork, cooperative activities are much more effective than individualistic or competitive ones (Anderson & Heyne, 2011; Anderson & Kress, 2003; Johnson, Johnson, & Hulobec, 2008; Rynders & Schleien, 1991). Cooperative activities give everyone an important role and require participants to work as a team toward a common goal. Examples of cooperative activities include baking, cake decorating, making pizza, gardening, building a fort, painting a mural, among many others. Anderson and Heyne (2011) offered the following recommendations for structuring cooperative play:

- Provide frequent and consistent opportunities to get acquainted. A group leader can use name tags, icebreakers, partner exercises, or small group activities to provide opportunities for participants to get to know each other and interact regularly.

- Maintain equal status. To support equal status among group members a facilitator can involve all group members in the decision making process, mix up groups and responsibilities, rotate roles, ask different participants to demonstrate, and break down activities into small steps. Avoiding the use of "special buddies" or "special privileges" for "charity cases" also promotes equal status.

- Set mutual goals. Working toward a mutual goal contributes to group cohesion. A group leader can reinforce this feeling of unity by emphasizing teamwork, helping the group set common goals, rotating positions, giving everyone a chance to play, and providing feedback on the whole group's progress.

- Support cooperation and interdependence. A spirit of cooperation can be built as participants work toward a common end or receive a common reward. Each participant can also be responsible for a key component necessary to complete a task (e.g., information, materials, resources). Or group members can rally team spirit around a group identity (e.g., flag, motto, mascot, T-shirt).

- Provide accurate information about the participant with a disability. Group leaders can play a key role in dispelling stereotypes and promoting positive attitudes toward people with disabilities. Conveying accurate information about the person and his disability at the beginning of a program can help promote socialization later on. An initial introduction of the participant should emphasize similarities with other

participants, explain necessary adaptations (e.g., communication or mobility device), and provide opportunities to ask questions. The family is the best source of what information should be shared with the group, and ideally a parent or other family member would provide the orientation. This approach builds an air of openness that generally satisfies participants' curiosity and alleviates any apprehension. It also smoothes the way for addressing other questions that may arise during the program.

- <u>Create fair and tolerant norms</u>. An egalitarian norm, which supports fair and caring behavior and an appreciation of diversity, can be supported in several ways. A group leader can model accepting behavior and avoid "over helping." She can also rotate roles and tasks, seek diverse input from everyone, reinforce rules and fairness, accentuate positive attributes and skills of all the group members, and emphasize teamwork.

❑ *Equalize interactions among the children.*
Treating all participants equally models like patterns of relating among group members. Balanced interactions may also be encouraged by letting children direct their own conversations; drawing out shy participants; preventing children from dominating the group by giving everyone an opportunity to be heard; and ensuring that all children play an active, contributing role. It is also important to hold the same high expectations for performance by participants with disabilities, providing support as needed, as for participants without disabilities.

❑ *Convert "object-oriented" activities to "people-oriented" activities.*
Sometimes the visual focus of recreational activities is on an object such as a ball, board game, computer screen, or art materials. This object-oriented point of reference can distract attention away from direct person-to-person communication. To convert object-oriented activities to people-oriented ones, a group leader can intentionally structure social interaction by having participants greet each other, take turns, share materials, offer encouragement, and comment on each other's efforts. Modeling or prompting these behaviors also supports direct communication among the children.

❑ *Adapt activities to meet individual abilities.*

Learning about the needs and abilities of all participants helps a group leader provide accommodations to facilitate maximum participation. Materials may be adapted, rules simplified, adaptive equipment used, skill sequences altered, and environments selected to support individual capabilities. Taking advantage of when a participant without a disability requires an accommodation minimizes singling out children with disabilities for individual assistance. During the lunch bunches, if a student with a disability needed support to participate in an activity, group members would discuss ways to include him while they ate their lunches. Involving them in this process tapped into their creativity and generated solutions the adult leader might not have considered. This method enables students without disabilities to advocate for those with a disability, take responsibility for their successful inclusion, as well as learn about their capabilities.

❑ *Keep the activity child-focused.*

During the grant project, facilitators noticed that sometimes too many adults in a play environment inhibited natural informal interactions among the children. For instance, a child with a disability might become too dependent on an adult, or group members might talk "through" an adult instead of directly to the participant with a disability. Activities can be made more child-focused by having children select their own activities, give input into decisions and rules, and sort out their own problems. Stepping back and letting interactions develop naturally, intervening only as needed, also keeps the focus on the children's interests and interactions.

❑ *Establish continuity between sessions.*

Structured recreational programs usually meet once a week over a period of several weeks or months. This longevity of programs allows group members to get to know each other over time and keeps them connected. Another way to strengthen group cohesiveness and achieve a sense of continuity is to involve the children in activities that require several sessions to complete. For example, activities could include gardening, sewing or handicraft activities, any number of art projects, or community service programs.

Lunch Bunch Summary

Who we choose for friends and socialization is entirely voluntary. Because of this element of personal choice, the lunch bunch guidelines cannot promise close relationships and friendships between children with and without disabilities will occur. However, applying the guidelines can create an open and welcoming environment that fosters socialization and increases the likelihood that friendships will develop.

Using the above guidelines contributed to the success of the lunch bunches on several counts. Students with disabilities no longer sat alone during lunchtime. Accurate information about disabilities was conveyed to students without disabilities. Mutual understanding and respect was established among participants, particularly as they learned to make decisions together as a group. Students without disabilities learned to include and advocate for classmates with disabilities, and this new learning noticeably boosted their self-confidence. Relaxed, informal interactions transpired among the children, with no respect to ability. The lunch bunches grew in popularity as classmates spontaneously asked to join the groups. In some instances, the lunch bunch was such a weekly highlight that, even when school was on holiday, the children asked to get together in a group member's home. At times, the relationships even extended beyond the school grounds as families arranged "play dates" at the children's requests – a clear indication that friendships were forming.

In short, the students who participated in the lunch bunches felt part of a community through a unique recreation experience that was carefully planned and facilitated. What could have been an isolating lunchtime experience was transformed into a fun and life-giving learning experience that contributed to the socio-emotional health of all the children.

The Playground

Service learning has always been a part of Diversity and Inclusive Recreation Services, a required course for all students in the Recreation, Parks and Leisure Studies Department and a prejudice and discrimination general education course open to the campus community. About 3 years ago, the principal of a local elementary school reached out to us -- she wanted to see more cooperation on the playgrounds, she wanted to see less bullying, she wanted a more inclusive playground. It was decided that the introduction of easy to learn and fun to play cooperative games would be the approach to take. Students trained as Inclusion Advocates, working in pairs, would introduce a new cooperative game each week for 4 to 6 weeks. During the last week of the program, Inclusion Advocates would review all the games with the students and playground staff to increase the likelihood the games would be played once the Inclusion Advocates were no longer on the playground. The process used to train Inclusion Advocates and facilitate inclusion on the playground follows.

The Training and Inclusion Processes

During the early weeks of the semester, students receive general inclusion advocacy training, which can be applied not only to playgrounds but to after-school programs, wheelchair sports programs, or through an individualized, community-based inclusive recreation service (Anderson & Wilkins, 2010). The purpose of the training is to provide trained and dedicated Inclusion Advocates the tools and resources needed to implement inclusive recreation services. Students learn about the purpose of inclusion advocacy; that is, to facilitate full inclusion into meaningful and freely chosen recreation and leisure opportunities using best practices in inclusive recreation. We discuss meaningful recreation (i.e., what it is, how to help make it happen) and we discuss inclusion (i.e., theoretical foundations of inclusion, what it is and what it isn't). We then present the "Inclusion Advocacy Process" broken into eight steps (Anderson & Wilkins, 2010):

❑ *Step 1: Receive a "Referral"*
First, we determine who needs assistance experiencing full participation in meaningful recreation and leisure activities of their choice on the playground, alongside their peers. This is determined through a meeting of the school principal, the course instructor, and teaching assistant. In this step, all Inclusion Advocates complete background checks as well.

❑ *Step 2: Gather Information*
Inclusion Advocates are assigned grade levels and assigned times with which they will work with the playground program. They then start getting to know the participants during their assigned times by chatting with them as well as their friends. They learn everything they can about students' goals and aspirations for recreation; their interests and strengths; and their leisure-related skills, knowledge, and attitudes. Using interviews and observation, Inclusion Advocates gather information and build positive relationships as well as get to know the environment. What does the environment require of the participants? Who is the playground staff? What kind of supports and accommodations are in place or readily available? Inclusive Advocates take the first week or two to observe the playground environment. They meet and get to know the students and all of

the playground staff, learning the rules and responsibilities, and gaining a clearer understanding of the demands of the playground environment.

❑ *Step 3: Bridge the Gap*

In preparation for this step, the Inclusion Advocates meet with the instructor and the teaching assistant to share observations and understandings, and to generate a list of cooperative games they would like to introduce on the playground over the next 4 to 6 weeks. For each game, Inclusion Advocates create a simple lesson plan and complete the "Bridging the Gap" worksheet (Anderson & Wilkins, 2010) (see Figure 1). This worksheet asks them to (a) describe the students and their capabilities; (b) describe the demands of the specific cooperative game (e.g., balance, holding hands, simple spelling) and the demands of the playground environment (e.g., large groups, 5-10 minute activity periods, physical environment); and (c) identify and bridge possible gaps using supports, accommodations, and/or adaptations. As the semester continues, Inclusion Advocates learn more and more about the demands of the playground environment and the abilities of the students, allowing them to better identify possible gaps and how they might be bridged.
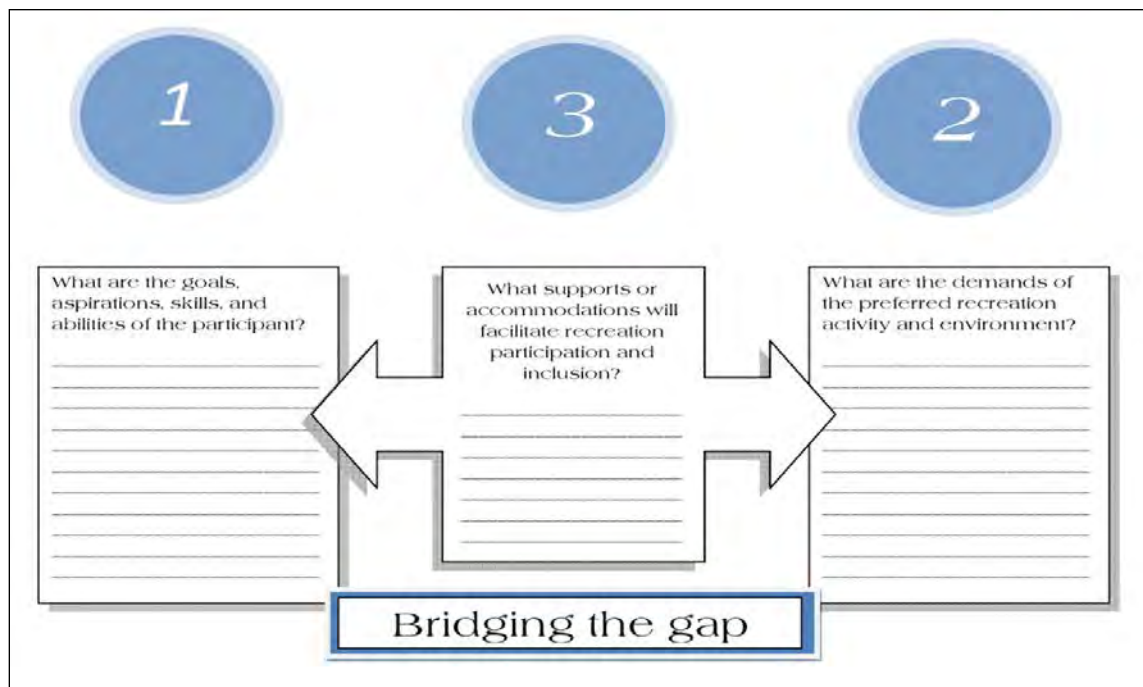

Figure 1. Bridging the Gap (Anderson & Wilkins, 2010)

❑ *Step 4: Implement the Plan*

Inclusion Advocates are reminded of the core principles of inclusion and to see themselves as "bridge builders." Their role is to help build natural connections and supports in the program with the participant and then to fade out from helping, allowing the students to make friends and acquaintances that will last beyond the Inclusive Playground Program. For the next 4 to 6 weeks, the Inclusion Advocates facilitate and

teach age-appropriate cooperative activities during recess, as many as five new activities each week.

❑ *Step 5: Take Notes*
Inclusion Advocates are asked to keep an ongoing log or journal after each interaction with the participants, family or staff. Remembering that we do not learn from experience but rather from reflection on experience, it is important to reflect after each interaction. This reflection shapes and informs subsequent interactions.

❑ *Step 6: Have Fun!!*
Inclusion Advocates continually work with the students and staff to facilitate successful inclusion, altering the plan when necessary. After introducing a new cooperative game, the Inclusion Advocates move around the playground, helping to make recess a safer and more equitable experience for all students.

❑ *Step 7: Fade Out and Evaluate*
When Inclusion Advocates approach the end of their inclusion advocacy, they fade out. During the last week of the playground program, activities are re-introduced to help the students and staff remember how to play each. Time is spent observing the playground and the students and "fading" from service provision. Fading out is successful when natural supports and accommodations are in place and working well for the participants. Inclusion Advocates remind the students and staff when their last visit on the playground will be and bring closure to their time with the children.

Reporting and Reflecting

Every time a new cooperative activity is introduced on the playground, Inclusion Advocates create a lesson plan for the activity and complete the "Bridging the Gap" worksheet. They also complete several reports and reflections. The focus of the first report is gathering information and building positive relationships so they will be in a position to begin to facilitate full inclusion of all students into meaningful recreation and leisure opportunities. They are encouraged to gather as much information as possible - the more information they gather at this point, the more successful they will be at promoting an inclusive and fun playground through the use of cooperative games and bridge building. The focus of the second report is on the implementation of inclusive and meaningful recreation activities and becoming reflective practitioners. After each weekly session, they document how the activities went in preparation for debriefing facilitated by the teaching assistant. The focus of the third report is bringing closure to their work as inclusion advocates. This level of documentation and reflection provide data to evaluate the Inclusion Playground Program and provide for a more meaningful and rich experience for the Inclusion Advocates.

Outcomes

The number of students playing together increased during their time on the playground, many of whom did not even know each other prior to the Inclusive Playground program. Inclusion Advocates saw friendships form. There were fewer, if any, disruptive behaviors on the

playground. Students were gentler with each other and more encouraging. One Inclusion Advocate felt like the time she took to explain to individual students the potential hurtfulness associated with their actions was effective. Playground staff reported less bullying in general when the Inclusion Advocates were there. They attributed this reduction, in part, to the additional staff on the playground, especially during the more competitive playground activities (e.g., kickball), which allowed for closer monitoring. Finally, there seemed to be an overall decrease in what one Inclusion Advocate called "verbal negativity" among the students.

Inclusion Advocates also reported many positive outcomes for themselves from facilitating the Inclusive Playground program. They reported being more deliberate in their choice of words, consciously modeling what they had come to learn as the most accurate, sensitive, and respectful language. Inclusion Advocates talked about how quickly they needed to become comfortable with differences in the Inclusive Playground program, and the importance of keeping an open mind and empathy. They learned and put into practice the skills needed to create and sustain inclusive play environments.

Conclusion

Something as important as social relationships and inclusion cannot be left to chance. Yet, on a large scale, the portion of the school day most amenable to building social relationships is left unstructured and unattended beyond monitoring for problem behaviors. These two model programs, Lunch Bunches and the Inclusion Playground program, provide illustrative examples of how lunch and recess periods could be structured to help children be included and build friendships. These same children, without this structure, are often marginalized or ignored at best, and the target of bullying at worse.

With collaboration between schools and universities or other service groups, and with guidance from leisure or therapeutic recreation professionals, these two programs could be replicated in any school setting. Because friendships and social affiliation are so critical to learning, growth, and well-being, an investment in its development will provide benefits in academics and other areas as well. The friendships we help facilitate for children with disabilities and other differences on the playground and in the lunchroom could well sustain over a lifetime, making all the difference in that journey.

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