Social and Self-Concepts for Students with IDD in Relation to Inclusive Programs

Maeve Carney

Submitted in Partial Completion of the Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in Special Education

Bridgewater State University

November 23, 2021

Dr. Ashley Rodrigues, Thesis Advisor
Dr. Pamela Myette, Committee Member
Dr. J. Edward Carter, Committee Member
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Bridgewater State University
Abstract

From experience and understanding, neurodivergent students are given less opportunity than neurotypical students in school-sponsored activities. With inclusive programs becoming more prevalent, students of all populations can connect and interact in the same activities rather than segregated organizations. Focusing on inclusive programs like Best Buddies and Unified Sports, this thesis will be identifying how these inclusive programs affect social and self-concepts on high school aged students with an IDD and their surrounding community. Through 25 peer-reviewed articles and self-reported data from five surrounding school districts of Southeastern Massachusetts, data and results will be illustrated and analyzed. Having a strong connection to one’s community positively affects how one views their surroundings; therefore, identifying any tie through this study will support the anticipated findings.
Introduction

Inclusive programs have quickly become the status quo in many high schools across the nation, and it is not just a coincidence. These programs give individuals with intellectual developmental disabilities (IDD) opportunities to participate and assimilate into daily routines and activities with their age-appropriate peer counterparts.

Decades of research prove that this has been an ongoing topic and is currently one of the main focuses in public education. To define an inclusive program, it is a program where all students, with or without an IDD, come together and interact in social activities, including but not limited to sporting events, school-sponsored events, monthly meetings, or study groups. Two of the largest and most popular inclusive programs are Best Buddies and Unified Sports. Best Buddies is an international organization founded by Anthony K. Shriver in 1989. His mission stems from the love and determination of his mother, Eunice Kennedy Shriver, displayed when she created the first-ever Special Olympics in their childhood backyard. Best Buddies’ mission is to create social friendships that can be transferred to social employment skills and/or employment post-graduation. Similarly, Beau Doherty used Eunice Kennedy Shriver as his inspiration when first creating Unified Sports. He was a longstanding president for Connecticut’s Special Olympics and believed that taking this already infamous program to the next level by placing both atypical and typical peers on the same team to train, work, and bond together would be the perfect environment to foster social and self-concepts for students with an IDD.

The narrative had always been about how lonely and secluded students with an IDD have felt. While unfortunately, the narrative may still occur, the growth of inclusive programs has been combatting that stigma and aiming to improve the quality of life. Students with IDD are placed into a bubble and often limited to what they cannot do instead of viewing them for what
they can do. Through inclusive programs, there is more exposure to be with their age-appropriate peers and more opportunities to showcase their strengths and participate in age-appropriate activities.

Besides the school community becoming more harmonious and allowing for more interactive settings, inclusive programs have boosted individual morale and given students with an IDD a better concept of their social and personal lives. These programs teach social cues, personal growth, acceptance, and very daily living activities. No matter their ability, all adolescents are navigating a very demanding time in their lives and need to learn how to cope with stressful situations and adapt to new situations. Inclusive programs allow students with an IDD to have a mentor going through the same experiences in order to make high school less intimidating, and give a new perspective. This period of growth allows for self-reflection, social concepts, and all-around better interactions for all of the students, especially those with an IDD since they are at a predisposition to fewer opportunities and awareness of these skills.

**Literature Review**

The common theme discovered from all 25 peer-reviewed articles, is how beneficial inclusive programs such as Best Buddies and Unified Sports have on individuals with an IDD. The clear pattern is that socialization and more exposure to age-appropriate experiences allow these students to have a greater self-esteem, confidence to navigate uncharted territories, awareness of social cues and norms, and overall genuine happiness.

Self-concept is the term used when an individual uses responses from surrounding peers and their own beliefs to create a sense of personal identity. Being around like individuals will increase one’s self-concept and surround oneself with positive peers. When given a survey, it has been found that on average high school aged students with IDD scored the highest in the
self-concept domain of happiness and satisfaction (Zakaria & Tahar, 2017). Students were subjected to a study wherein inclusion classes, they attempted to identify what self-concept students with special needs faced and in which categories. The findings were not shocking and are supported through many years of research.

Similarly, it has been found that self-concept results are closely tied to social skills and fall relatively in the same range (Kucukera & Cifci Tekinarshan, 2015). Social skills and interacting with neurotypical counterparts help teach neurodivergent students nontraditional interactions that their teachers cannot always provide. The sense of inclusion and interactions with age-appropriate peers are irreplaceable and create the best type of learning. Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (TPSID) are a new way for students with IDD to continue to be included and stay connected with their peers. These opportunities provided great satisfaction and enjoyment for individuals with IDD through the vast bonds, chances to remain in contact, and the confidence they gained going through the process with their neurotypical peers (Folk et al., 2012). There is a strong trend of self-concept increasing due to confidence produced by these inclusive opportunities and friendships.

With the increase of positive self-worth, students with IDD are more positive and more receptive to joining other inclusive programs due to their social awareness and friendships. While studies show a less than popular status than their counterparts without an IDD, these students still felt capable and willing to participate in social interactions because of their skills through inclusive programs (Avramidis, 2013). Inclusive programs do not ensure instant popularity for students with IDD, but it is a good segway into more social activities and the opportunity to make friendships they usually would not. Navigating social settings and gaining knowledge in age-appropriate recreational settings are extremely important to the development
and create an overall better social dynamic. Realistically, not all programs can be entirely successful, but by placing students with similar characteristics and interests, adult supervision, and integrity of the process, social success can be proven—better awareness for students with IDD (Carter & Hughes, 2005). An exciting finding when studying social concepts is the idea of prosocial behaviors. Prosocial behaviors are those that ultimately benefit those around them. Those who engage in prosocial behaviors help aid in the increase of positive self-concepts. Participants in inclusive programs compassionately act towards their peers and create a more harmonious environment for all peers, not just those with IDD. This harmonious nature creates more social awareness and confidence to engage more frequently in social outings for students with IDD (Laghi et al., 2016). On a slightly different note, it was found that students with IDD are equally responsible for creating the social dynamic between themselves and neurotypical peers. Students without IDD had a greater interest by initiating participation, making the social interactions within the inclusive groups more beneficial for the collective whole (Devine & Lashua, 2002). The idea of inclusive groups is no pressure on the neurotypical peers; it is instead a foundation for both sets of students to create friendships collaboratively and explore their surroundings together as a cooperative unit, not individual entities. With the guidance from neurotypical peers, it facilitates social settings and positively increases both self and social-concepts. While most research focuses on the fulfillment from inclusive friendships, it has been found that friendships fostered between two individuals with IDDs are almost more beneficial. By gaining the skills from neurotypical peers, students with IDD can receive the social fulfillment they yearn, but then gain the confidence to replicate similar friendships with their classmates in a less formal setting, but at the same skill level (Kersh et al., 2013). Holistically, research has found positive benefits in all facets for inclusive friendships in the
social world. These findings and results further prove that inclusive programs allow for social
growth for individuals with IDD and their capability to flourish. By gaining social confidence
and awareness, students are more apt to take on new surroundings and gain valuable lessons
from their peers they could not learn from a classroom.

An effective inclusive program that has been around for over three decades is Best
Buddies. Founded off of the ideas of Special Olympics, Best Buddies’ central value is fostering
cooperative and positive friendships between individuals with and without IDD while
maintaining respect and dignity for all. As stated above, these mentorship friendships are equally
beneficial for all involved and teach lifelong lessons. It has been found that individuals who have
created an inclusive bond with a peer are more willing to participate in various scenarios and
increase overall well-being throughout high school (Copeland et al., 2002). While much of the
research focuses on the emotional and mental well-being of individuals who participate in
inclusive programs, there is a physical benefit as well. Individuals who have participated in Best
Buddies identified in one study how not only were they mentally in a better place, but they felt
more inclined to partake in physical activity due to the variety of activities involved with Best
Buddies and finding new hobbies to get into with their buddy (Jago et al., 2011). On a larger
scale, both parties for the buddy pairs have noticed significant advancements in their lives. They
both noticed the evident changes in attitudes and perspectives and have even found that because
of Best Buddies, their lives had been positively enhanced (Hardman & Clark, 2006). Best
Buddies has been successful due to its longevity and plethora of research on it, but it is still
equally important to note all of its accomplishments. Best Buddies has dramatically influenced
the rising numbers of typical and neurodivergent friendships in adolescents in high school. The
surge of this organization is evident across the nation and continues to grow due to the positive
outcomes of the friendships regarding self and social identification and skills. Both parties have identified a stronger sense of empathy and kinder attitudes to various scenarios, including friendship daily life scenarios (Lehman, 2002).

To conclude research on Best Buddies, it follows that the individuals who partake in Best Buddies, either as a peer buddy or a buddy, were more likely to engage in socially beneficial situations. It was found that those who interact in inclusive programs show greater scores of empathy and compassion and a higher sense of self-respect and confidence (Laghi et al., 2018). Within Best Buddies, individuals with IDD can better grasp self and social-concepts and are more in tune with their age-appropriate peers. It intensifies engagement and gives a chance for all individuals to coexist and find common connections between all.

Unified Sports is a relatively newer inclusive program, but the vast sports choices to play and the rapid growth make it an important program to find the connection between social and self-concept for high school-aged students with IDD. Unified Sports allows both neurotypical and neurodivergent peers to compete together and bond over mutual interests. This is no different at the Special Olympic World Games. In 2015, the athletes recorded significantly higher inclusion rates, comfortability in social settings, and great friendships made (Cheng-Chen & Davis, 2015). This type of relationship is reciprocal and is vital to remember and note. One study, in particular, wanted equal input from mentors as they would with mentees. Mentors raved about their position as role models and valued the connections and impact they made as most beneficial, while mentees relished in the social acceptance and emotional support they received (Gunn et al., 2017). Emotional support is a crucial aspect of the daily life of a student with IDD, so it is great to see programs acknowledging the emotional aspect of this relationship in conjunction with the social aspect. Following suit, New Jersey Governor Chris Christie pushes
for all districts to implement Unified Sports into schools due to the high social and emotional benefits this program brings. He believes that this bond and increase in social concept is vital in education and should not go amiss (Maloney, 2014). Unified Sports is known for its increase in self and social-concept; however, it is often overlooked on what it decreases. In one study, one Unified Soccer program found a decrease in behavioral problems in students with IDD, which in turn creates a more positive atmosphere, and allows for students to participate more frequently and more conductively (Bota et al., 2017). Even better, the same researchers previously identified a solid case of greater self-concept and social concept. Through Unified Sports, they said that all of the training and time spent together allows athletes to foster a genuine friendship and transfer into academic settings, equating to educational success (Bota et al., 2014). In a more experimental study, Unified Sports scored well with all athletes in a pre and post-test on attitudes towards individuals in different intellectual and developmental populations. All results showed significantly positive attitudes towards the opposite peers due to their predetermined positive attitudes towards themselves and their identity groups (Sullivan & Glidden, 2014). High school-aged students with IDD increasingly feel equal with their peers and adapt to the norm of social behaviors. While participating in Unified Sports, students were observed to participate in less undesired behaviors due to their social surroundings and feeling of belonging. Students identified a positive reception from their peers without IDD, which gave them confidence and desirable behaviors (Ozer et al., 2012). Unified Sports continues to be a growing program, and will continue to do so with these findings since social and self-concept continues to increase positively, not just in students with IDD but also their peers without IDD.

Unified Sports has become an international phenomenon and has the same effect in countries around the world. One Unified Sports team in Europe found four qualitative data
points, proving they found personal development and growth in all athletes involved, more equal bonds through the inclusivity, positive self-perceptions of students with IDD, and a stronger school community (McConkey et al., 2013). Six years later, the same researchers continued to develop their findings. They identified in now Eurasian countries four main feelings felt by all athletes: happiness, relaxation, confidence, and contentedness. Unified Sports grew the social community and built a stronger sense of unity (McConkey et al., 2019). Staying within the Eurasian regions, a different team of researchers continued to find the same results. Unified Sports had positive outcomes for all involved, even the coaches, in positive self-reflection, higher inclusion rates, and increased self-worth (Hassan et al., 2012). Students in Europe have reported on both socioemotional improvements and physical improvements since joining Unified Sports. The mind and body coexist, and with the positive influences of inclusive programs, all athletes interviewed noted an increase in physical skill and enjoyment, social and communicative skills, and an overall better self-concept (Wilski et al., 2012). Now in a different demographic, in New Zealand, one study was attempting to find if attitudes of neurotypical peers would change with the involvement of neurodivergent peers in their sporting programs. Unified Sports was introduced, and like many other research projects, the results had favorable outcomes. It was identified that inclusion of all peers led to ‘positive peer social acceptance’ and a better self-concept for students with IDD (Townsend & Hassall, 2007). Unified Sports has proven through its global impact that it is here to stay and helps foster and maintain positive self-perception with the foundation of robust community ties and social acceptance.

In conclusion, all peer-reviewed articles found remarkably similar findings. Different students, all had one element in common: positive self and social concepts being enhance. Best Buddies and Unified Sports are two of the largest and well-known inclusive programs, and
rightfully so. The inclusion and positive relationships created many positive feelings and ideas, which have an overall beneficial relationship for all involved. These inclusive programs have statistical proof that they do indeed increase both self and social concepts.

**Methods**

In conducting this research, data was collected and analyzed from five surrounding school districts, Bridgewater-Raynham, Mansfield, North Attleboro, Norton, and Sharon. Surveys were in the form of Google Forms, one sent to students with an IDD ages 14-22, and a separate form to faculty members heavily involved with the same inclusive programs, like advisors, coaches, or volunteers. Questions on the forms included but were not limited to asking which programs individuals were involved in, how the programs made students feel about themselves, if staff members saw a change in school environment dynamics, and, overall satisfaction since joining the respective program(s). All data collected from these forms were fully confidential, and no question would give away any identifying information since the wording of questions was very objective and broad.

To support the real-life findings, the data was cross-examined with 25 peer-reviewed articles. To keep information relevant, all sources have been within the last 20 years, dating between 2002 and as recent as 2019. This appears as an extensive range; however, there is a purpose for the disparity in time. Later on, in the results and discussion, it will be explained; however, this wide range of time shows how findings for this topic have stayed constant, if not stronger, as the years go on. All articles were read thoroughly, marked up, and quoted to strengthen the argument that inclusive programs, like Best Buddies and Unified Sports, provide a positive self and social concept for high school aged students with an IDD.
Both forms of data collection were precisely picked for this specific topic. While self-reports can be hit or a miss, the survey questions were crafted to avoid biases and allowed for free speech and honest answers. Hearing from students and faculty participating in these programs daily was vital because it is accurate, tangible data relevant to this study. By using surrounding school districts, it is a representative cluster of schools that share similar populations so that no data would become an outlier. With that being said, only using five similar districts does not represent all students with IDD, so more data must be collected and analyzed.

Peer-reviewed articles are one of the greatest tools because experts share their knowledge, allowing readers to gain knowledge and even perspectives from reading their materials. Finding 25 unique topics, all related to the idea of a positive relationship between self and social concept, and these inclusive programs, was challenging but made this research more holistic. It allowed for many stories to be told, and new information came out of every article. Having a variety of materials, pointing in the same direction, allowed this research to be where it is today and confirmed this was the proper process if all types of data (surveys and articles) confirmed the original hypothesis.

Results

From human participants, this research, unfortunately, did not have a wide variety nor abundance of data to enhance the evidence; it only could merely support the findings. Surveys gauging feelings and opinions from five local public high school districts on their inclusive programs (Best Buddies and Unified Sports) were asked to be answered by both high school aged students with IDD and their respective faculty members. Of those five districts, only two of them filled out the surveys, and from those two districts, there were less than 15 total responses between faculty members and students.
All seven student responses were from Mansfield High School students. All seven of them had similar feelings regarding finding enjoyment in their program(s), making new friends, and gaining a new sense of confidence through joining these programs. All seven students felt a sense of neutrality ranging to extreme happiness because of their programs, and the majority of results leaned towards extreme happiness. Best Buddies alone appears to be the more popular program choice with, 42.9% of results showing students are only involved with Best Buddies. 28.6% of results say students are only in Unified Sports, and the final 28.6% of results say students are involved in both Best Buddies and Unified Sports. Overall, Mansfield High School has a positive relationship between inclusive programs and students with IDD.

There were only four submissions for data for the faculty survey: two faculty members from North Attleboro High School, and two faculty members from Mansfield High School. Similarly to student involvement, Best Buddies alone has greater faculty involvement, with 50% of results saying they are only involved in Best Buddies. Again, like the student results, 25% of faculty members are involved in only Unified Sports, and the last 25% of faculty members are involved in both Best Buddies and Unified Sports. Like evidence from peer-reviewed research has shown, all four responses stated that they noticed an increase in positive relationships between students with IDD and their neurotypical peers through these programs implemented at their schools. The consensus from faculty members was that there was a greater sense of community in the schools because students with IDD were included more frequently and saw an increase in self-esteem. They also saw that these inclusive programs also allowed neurotypical peers to be exposed and participate with students they normally do not hang out with. The final, most crucial piece of results was that faculty members said there was an apparent increase of positive self and social-concepts at their schools once inclusive programs were introduced. They
found that their students were more accepting and made for an overall better learning environment due to the variety of activities individuals could participate in, how students took responsibility in their acts of inclusion, and how it benefited all involved.

**Discussion**

All questions on both surveys aimed to identify if there was a relationship between these programs and change of perception for students with IDD. The questions were comprehensive, however they were not overwhelming and manageable to answer. There was enough variety in the questions to see any variance, but similar enough to focus on one focal question. Regardless of the number of responses, it is evident when comparing the survey responses and peer-reviewed article findings that inclusive programs are beneficial in virtually all aspects, including students with IDD, students without IDD, faculty, school environments, and the community.

Small sample sizes in results are peculiar in research and pose a few questions towards this topic specifically. There were no outlying results; all of the results, faculty and student based, supported and followed the previous academic findings. One explanation for the heavy domination of strictly Mansfield High School students participating in the survey was looking at how long these students have been involved in their respective programs. Most of the Mansfield High School students had been a part of their programs for a minimum of two years and went as far as five plus years of experience. With the length of experience and exposure, one could ponder the idea that this school district has had inclusive programs for some time, allowing for such positive and receptive participants to fill out their surveys.

The lack of responses was somewhat expected due to the nature of this topic. In a climate where COVID is still placing harsh restrictions on daily living, it could be assumed that doing
this research later in the year would have more of a turnout. This is the first academic school year where students are back in-person for classes, with limited to no Zoom courses. Despite the in-person aspects, some clubs have had to downsize, or limit in-person contact due to health guidelines. Potentially, students and faculty members would have felt more inclined to participate later in the school year once they got back into their typical routine. Whether it was the stress of coming back into the building for learning or the lack of participation on the high schools’ end of inclusive programs due to COVID restrictions, this research could have been more accurate and more fulfilling with more time and opportunities to be in-person again.

There is many reasons why this research did not receive as much recognition or participation, but the missing numbers could tell a completely different story often overlooked in research as a whole. All of the results that were submitted were in agreement with the peer-reviewed findings: inclusive programs do have a positive relationship with self and social-concepts for high school aged students with IDD. Therefore, it would be curious to investigate a broader range of school districts, seeing as the five school districts this research was sent to all have highly similar demographics. All of the districts have similar socioeconomic statuses, race, gender, and family make-ups. While any results would represent the sample, they may not be entirely representative of the whole population. With that in mind, would the results still follow suit in more diverse environments? How would the data look if school districts were chosen at random and not based on proximity to the researcher? While the answers may remain unknown, those are important aspects of research to keep in mind and help decipher through ideas and accurate data.
Conclusion

Due to disparities between students with IDD and students without IDD, it was essential to identify what would help close this gap. Inclusive programs, specifically Best Buddies and Unified Sports, have become some of the most popular programs worldwide for inclusion, so it was essential to identify if there was any rhyme or reason for those claims. Best Buddies and Unified Sports can create bonds and friendships between peers that historically would not have the opportunity to surround themselves with and find similarities and connections together. These inclusive programs have evidence supporting a positive increase in self-esteem and self-concept, a positive increase in social skills or social-concept, and interestingly enough, increased positive feelings for individuals without IDD. Best Buddies and Unified Sports give the platform of friendships to be made, which allows all students to learn and grow. If students without IDD can see a positive increase in emotions, they will be more likely and able to facilitate the same process for their peers with IDD. Overall, the camaraderie inclusive programs create allows for better relationships to be made, which allows for better self-awareness and perception to evolve. Best Buddies and Unified Sports bring many individuals many opportunities throughout their involvement, but the most significant element it can and has provided is the positive self and social-concepts for students with IDD.
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