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English III

7 April 2023

Aspects of Integration for Children with Disabilities in the Mainstream

Gabe's mother, Marcy Selaya, explains the common biases that restrict people with disabilities from the opportunities and experiences that kids typically enjoy. "I wish they didn't see Gabe for his diagnosis. I think because there are physical markers and characteristics for Down Syndrome, sometimes people see that, and (especially certain generations) carry a bias because a lot of things have been changing the past ten, twenty years, and have become a lot more open. There are people who see him and then automatically assume that he is not able to do certain things" (Selaya). Fostering relationships between students with disabilities and those without is challenging. Continuing these friendships and interactions outside of established programs and into the post-educational year, as the students move into possible careers, is even harder.

Friendships and inclusivity are vital for everyone. Among the high school population, there are kids with disabilities who are often separated from the larger student body. Fostering friendships for children with disabilities and their peers is crucial because every student deserves the opportunity to make a friend both in the classroom and outside of it.

From my firsthand account as a teacher's assistant, the result of these friendships is very positive. After building relationships with these students over several months, I went to their taiko performance (a Japanese drumming class) for a World Down Syndrome Day celebration.

Brian, one of the students performing, saw me watching the show and stopped drumming altogether to wave at me with a huge smile on his face.

Building relationships with these students has been so rewarding, but it has also made me realize the bias and lack of awareness that surrounds the special education community. More programming is needed to bridge this gap. However, after high school, there are organizations and programs that currently work to help people with disabilities get jobs and be independent. There is uncertainty for both students and parents about what comes next after these programs end, so it is vital that these initiatives continue to evolve and grow.

There are state and federal laws in place to protect people with disabilities and provide support in younger years. One of the most prevalent laws in place for young students is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This act requires all students with disabilities under the age of 21 to have educational support and other related services for the child (California specifically extends this program until the age of 22). After high school, they are able to go to an adult program until they age out. The U.S. Department of Education explains, “IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more than 7.5 million (as of school year 2020-21) eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities” (“About IDEA”). This is a useful program because it provides kids the opportunity to learn with accommodations, and gives parents a place where their child can go during the day to learn. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) works in tandem with IDEA because they both support the lives and needs of kids with disabilities. The National Network states that the ADA “guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications” (“Americans with Disabilities Act”). These

are all important factors in bridging the gap between these students and their peers, but a divide will continue to exist without more advocacy.

This separation begins to widen as students grow into high school. Often, students with disabilities are placed in classrooms with widely differing schedules than the mainstream population and are often placed in an alternative vicinity to their peers. This is not inherently negative, but it does cause a barrier to social interactions within the wider student population, and makes it difficult for these students to form lasting friendships outside of the classroom bubble. There are some schools that are taking initiatives to help fix this issue. At Mountain View High School, Spartan Buddies pairs students in the Special Education classes with students in the mainstream population. The club meets once a week during lunch on Thursdays and participates in many events, including birthday parties, a large Saint Patrick's Day Dance, off-campus excursions at the movie theater or local venues, and participates in marching in the cultural parade as one cohesive peer group.

As a President of the Spartan Buddies club, I observe all the successes and challenges of the club. While some of the pairings between kids with disabilities and their peers bring joy to these students, oftentimes the buddies outside of the special education classroom have difficulty grasping how meaningful these interactions are, and fail to show up consistently to the club. This leaves some buddies alone during lunch because some high school students decided going out to lunch or studying for a class was more important on this particular day. This defeats the purpose of Spartan Buddies because someone who does not show up for you is not a real friend. While this is a negative, there are still a majority of students who do show up for their buddies and build meaningful connections. As Selaya explains, "around Homecoming when Spartan Buddies march in the parade and stuff like that, he loves all of it. So I think he really enjoys having those

connections with the other students.” Having these positive interactions helps foster a more inclusive environment. Programs like this help integrate these students and allow for interactions between them, but it is not a solution that guarantees lasting friendships. Special Education teacher Seamus Quillinan speaks on Spartan Buddies as the club advisor: “I think it is the right thing to do, the right start. I don't think it always leads to genuine friendships, but I don't know how else to do it. It provides an opportunity for our students and the students with disabilities to meet their peers. That's really cool, but how many authentic friendships have come out of it? I don't know, I wish it were more.”

While Spartan Buddies and organizations like it provide social opportunities for students, it is a challenge to maintain partnerships between the kids with disabilities and their buddies beyond the school year. Even after spending a whole year as friends in Spartan Buddies, oftentimes these connections do not last longer than the span of the year. Some of the students with disabilities do not continue to reach out or even talk to their past years buddy again. There is a difficulty in finding people who are completely willing to hang out with their buddies outside of school, and in a high school setting it is just impossible to enforce that standard. As Quillinan explains, “It's just one of those things that has to come from within.”

This is not to say that no real friendships are formed in this club. There are cases where the paired friendships result in a friendship that lasts for years. Even if the paired buddies do not last as long term friends, sometimes friendships form between the buddies, or between the other students. In the very least, the exposure to the whole student population has shown to be positive.

Another program similar to Spartan Buddies that has reached international success is Best Buddies: an organization that works to create friendships across all ages. The organization states, “These programs build one-to-one friendships between people with and without intellectual and

developmental disabilities (IDD), offering social interactions while improving the quality of life and level of inclusion for a population that is often isolated and excluded” (“Friendship”). Best Buddies has more specific requirements that creates more opportunities and chances for friendships to occur. They require buddies to have at least two off campus activities per month, and all friendships are one-to-one, compared with Spartan Buddies that are often in groups of three or four. This allows for a greater chance for an authentic friendship to occur. While there is still nothing people can do that guarantees a friendship that lasts, as typical friendships can attest to, these are still some ways that allow people with disabilities to have a greater chance at relationships as those who are typically developing.

It is important to note that not all people with disabilities want or know how to maintain friendships. As Quillinan observes, “Some of the students on the spectrum, not all, are interested in having friends. That doesn’t mean they shouldn’t have an opportunity to have a friend.” This is why programs like Best Buddies and Spartan Buddies are so crucial because every person should be able to have an opportunity to have a friend inside or outside of the classroom. Having these programs allows for integration that would otherwise be impossible for some of these students.

One of the difficulties about making friendships for the students is that it is challenging to get males to join clubs like Best Buddies and Spartan Buddies. Quillinan describes his initial experience with the club: “When I was at UC Irvine I joined Best Buddies. I was literally the only male in the club... one of the buddies said I want a friend that's a guy. So guess what? I was paired with this guy named Eric Farber. We were friends for years. I was his first friend and to me, that's just so sad, you go through life you know, and don't have a friend. Eric ended up knowing my wife and everything. Probably like once a month we would go to lunch.” This is a

case where the club made a significant, lasting impact on both buddies. Even if the majority of the groups do not stay friends over time, giving the chance at friendship, and having even just one friendship that lasts makes these programs worth it.

There is still progress that needs to be made. The Arc, an organization that works to create friendships between students with disabilities and peers, features first hand accounts from students with disabilities, and their relationships with peers. One student, Todd, states, “Social acceptance and daily greetings are positive interactions. I just wish that people didn’t walk away after they said hi or gave a high-five” (Rossetti). While there are positive interactions, the problem remains on taking these interactions to the next step of a long term friendship. To shift the conversation, there is not only the acknowledgement that fostering social interactions in both groups is important, but also the idea that it would be beneficial to have the students integrated in some academic or elective courses.

Some parents like Marcy Selaya argue that students with disabilities should be in mainstream classes or have access to more classes to allow for more integration. While some administrators maintain the idea that this would only be possible in a utopian world, and that there are barriers in place that make this difficult to accomplish. They claim that many students with disabilities have aids and learning accommodations that need attention, and being in their own classes separated is an achievable answer. In a mainstream class, they may not get the same attention and time to get the help and support they need. Alternatively, many feel if the child has an interest and the ability to be included, they should make every effort to do so. Both the peers and students with disabilities benefit from integrated classes. Understood, a non-profit organization that provides resources and support for schools and work, states, “The same research shows that their peers benefit, too. They’re more comfortable with and more tolerant of

differences. They also have increased positive self-esteem and diverse, caring friendships” (Osewalt).

While it would be difficult to have complete integration with the current school system in the United States, there are some classes that should allow both students with disabilities and peers to take part in. For example, Mountain View High School dance teacher Lauren Kato states, “People should take classes that they are ready for, and everyone is ready for dance.” Ms. Kato has integrated classes that include the students with disabilities. This program has grown throughout the years, and now dance has become a class that all students can enjoy and participate in. She says that some of the special education students have greatly benefited from being in an intermingled classroom. She speaks fondly about one student named Iasmim and says, “she started with me and was so shy, painfully shy would come in every day and not make eye contact, would stand up against the wall. . . I was like this girl she's going to be out of here in no time, but then the music would start to come on, and when there is a song that she enjoys or has some sort of beat, that girl turns on. . . and let me tell you, we end up at Foothill College for these shows, and I have never seen Yasmeen light up and just be so herself. It was the most beautiful thing to watch” (Kato). There are so many benefits to having students in special education have access to different activities and electives that the rest of the population has. Iasmim is only one example of the many students that have new activities that they love through having inclusive class options. Some parents wish there were more classes that integrated all students. Selaya explains, “I would love to see some academic type classes as well because I think it brings benefit to the people who have learning challenges and just to help people see the world in a little bit of a different way and to sort of expand perspectives.” Having more classes integrated allows everyone to be exposed to all different people and perspectives, and allows for

social benefits that are impossible with the separated classes. While it is important to focus on the school years and having all the resources for these students, the question remains about what happens after students with disabilities age out of the school system.

After they age out of the adult program, they face the biggest challenge of finding jobs and being independent. This can be difficult because of the discrimination and lack of jobs available for people with disabilities. The majority of places that hire consist of grocery stores or cafes, and while this is great and allows people to make wages and have a sustainable job, there is the need for more accessible jobs. Some companies are working to make new job programs for people with disabilities. System Analysis Program Development (SAP) has started giving individuals with disabilities jobs in the tech world. Dr. Lawrence Fung, director of the Stanford Neurodiversity Project states, "I went to a conference and SAP is a software giant that has a program called autism at work. . . SAP gave these individuals a chance to show themselves, they now became some of the most productive people at SAP." The main problem that people with disabilities face in the job world is the stereotypes and idea that they are incapable of doing certain things. While some disabilities hold more obstacles than others, it is crucial that there are job opportunities available. It is vital that people with disabilities are valued in society. Selaya recounts that she ". . . had a friend in high school who said, 'what would you change about Gabe if you could?' And I thought about it and like, you know, actually, I wouldn't change Gabe. I would change the world because it's the world that needs to change how they see him and how they accept him." It is important that people with disabilities are seen as equal members of society, instead of separated as they often are. The more acceptance and inclusion that exists in the lives of these individuals will be improved dramatically. These children need to be brought into the spotlight. The more accepting and inclusive the world is, the more opportunities that will

be available for these children. It is a necessity that more people must open their minds and hearts to see the capability and love these people bring to the world.

To conclude, starting in high school and beyond, it is a necessity that people with disabilities be given the best chance to develop relationships with peers in the mainstream, and alternatively give the mainstream people the ability to see the value in people with disabilities. I love these students and I want them to be able to do whatever they want in the world. By limiting the obstacles and hardships they must go through because of the discrimination they face. They have hopes and dreams like many kids and should be able to have the resources available to achieve them. Iasmim's mom, Alessandra Canales, explains that, "Iasmim wants to be a top model, and I think she has potential because, in my eyes, she is beautiful." It is critical that a world is created where kids with disabilities can move into adulthood, businesses can understand their values, and the general public can develop an appreciation for people with disabilities in the workplace and all areas of adult life. The most important point to be made is that it is not the people with disabilities who need to change—it's the world that needs to change.

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