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Social Development Through a Lunch Buddy Program

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Social Development Through a Lunch Buddy Program

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A Literature Review Presented

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Abstract

The intent of this literature review is to discuss the necessity of a lunch buddy program for students in special education. The review first looks at the process of inclusive education and the effect that the educational movement has had on students in special education. Inclusion is defined as well as the impact it has on an individual's social development. Using research-based evidence, the review will also establish the importance of peer buddy programs for the social development of students in special education. A lunch buddy program will provide special education teachers with the means to assist their students during an essential and social part of every school day, lunchtime.

Social Development Through a Lunch Buddy Program

Lunchtime is one of the few periods within the school day when students can interact freely with their peers (Hughes et al., 1999). There is no teacher directing students' thinking or requiring specific actions of them. Lunchtime is also one of the rare portions of the school day that students in special education can truly interact with their general education peers (Copeland et al., 2002). There is no regard to the differences of their IQ scores or their academic abilities. Peer Buddy Programs have been implemented in schools to help students in special education interact and gain friendships with their peers (Asmus et al., 2017). Some schools have initiated a "Lunch Bunch" program that allows general education students and special education students a time of interacting during their lunch period (Hughes et al.). According to Copeland et al., by increasing the interaction opportunities among all students, schools have noticed more appropriate social behaviors displayed by their special education students. Lunchtime peer network programs have also been implemented as interventions to increase social interactions (Hochman et al., 2015). These examples show how students can talk, interact, and enjoy the friendships they have created with their peers.

Students who are in special education typically have a decreased ability regarding various aspects of their social development (Hutchins, Burke, Hatton, & Bowman-Perrott, 2016). These students commonly lack the skills to respond, initiate, and participate in conversation (Katz & Girolametto, 2015). School is the place where students can and should work on their social skills (Asmus et al., 2017). A school setting encourages social interactions with a variety of school-aged peers through the school day. Students are taught how to communicate and collaborate with their peers. These opportunities exist during academic time in group activities as well as during non-academic time spent in the lunchroom and at recess (Simpson & Bui, 2017). Schools also

teach appropriate social skills so that students can be comfortable interacting with people of all ages in their community. Social development, therefore, is a very important aspect of a student's education.

The lunchroom is an optimal environment to encourage the social development of students in special education (Hochman et al., 2015). Creating opportunities for students in special education to interact socially with their general education peers can be incorporated into a daily routine using a lunch buddy program. Such a program could pair a student in special education with a student in general education. These partners would spend time conversing and eating their lunch together. The partnerships would increase the students' social skills and overall social development, along with creating lasting friendships. These interactions would also help with self-esteem concerns as well as peer acceptance issues. Implementing a lunch buddy program provides the positive interactions needed to establish the true element of inclusion into a school system.

Review of the Literature

As human beings we desire to interact socially with each other. Some individuals are better equipped for these types of interactions, and the process is very easy for them. Other individuals must have instruction and assistance to complete tasks involving social interactions (Hutchins et al., 2016). Our country's educational system once had obstructions that deterred the process of social development for students needing special education services (Murdick, Gartin, & Fowler, 2014). Over time our country's educational system has been transformed into an inclusive and supportive framework. Each step improved our nation's understanding and services needed for all of its students (Murdick, Gartin, & Fowler, 2014). This literature review will show how important inclusive education is for all students. It will also show how students in special

education thrive with social development when appropriate peer support systems are implemented.

Historical Perspective

Inclusion is defined as employing the general education classroom to be each student's primary source of education (Hammel, 2004). Hammel further states that inclusion requires special education students to be placed in the general education classrooms and only removed for services that cannot be adapted or accommodated there. Although inclusion in the educational realm is now prevalent in the United States, it is not something that our country has always embraced. A mere 50 years ago students with disabilities were excluded from our educational systems (Harrower, 1999). Parents were responsible for providing education for their children with disabilities if they so desired. These parents would have to pay for private education services for their children, possibly sending them far away from home, or provide an education for their children at home (Katsiyannis, Yell, & Bradley, 2001).

Inclusion was first recognized in the United States during the civil rights movement, specifically during the court case of *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954) (Kirby, 2017). Based on the 14th amendment of the United States Constitution, the ruling on this court case determined that segregating schools on the basis of race was found to be unconstitutional (Harrower, 1999). The decision to extend equal rights to all minorities helped to pave the way for equal treatment of people with disabilities as well. This movement commenced the advocacy of equal educational opportunities by parents of individuals with disabilities. Parents began demanding educational equity for their children with disabilities. Kirby argues that court cases such as *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*

(1972) and *Mills v. Boards of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972) were paramount to opening up people's minds to an educational system involving inclusion.

In 1975, Public Law 94-142, also known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), was passed. This law established the right to public education for all students regardless of disability (Brock, 2018). It required all school districts to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students. Each student, regardless of ability, would now be given the opportunity to learn. This law also addressed the topic of least restrictive environment (LRE). Students with disabilities would now be allowed to learn next to their peers in a general education school setting. These policies were created to prepare students for the future inclusion they would experience in the real world (Kirby, 2017).

In 1990 EAHCA was reauthorized and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This revision required an Individualized Education Program (IEP) containing meaningful educational goals to be implemented for each student receiving special education services. In 1997 this policy was amended to target grade content standards for all students, even those with disabilities (Katsiyannis et al., 2001). IDEA was again revised in 2004 and given the title Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEIA ensured access to the general education curriculum for all students and encouraged educators to hold high expectations for their students in special education (Brock, 2018). This policy now includes all students in statewide assessments (Kirby, 2017). Inclusion is now viewed as increasing opportunities for all students to learn together by sharing all aspects of educational activities (Schaefer, Cannella-Malone, & Carter, 2016).

Inclusive education continues to evolve as our country's knowledge and understanding grows and expands. Students with disabilities now spend more time in general education

classrooms each school day (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). Their opportunities to interact and form friendships with their general education peers have greatly increased. The changes that have occurred in our nation's educational policies have impacted students' placements and interactions. The social development of students in special education is now a major goal in inclusive education (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015).

Underlying Theoretical Frameworks

Social Development

Social skills are one component of social development that contributes to a person's ability to interact with others. Social skills are defined as behaviors that allow a person to interact appropriately and effectively with others (Kelly, 2017). These skills can be both verbal and non-verbal and are required to obtain and maintain personal relationships. Research states that personal relationships consisting of family and friends have been linked to the quality of life for an individual along with his or her overall happiness (Kelly). A person's happiness depends on his or her ability to communicate and interact with others. Opportunities to interact with others, therefore, need to be available for a person to develop his or her social skills.

Observational learning is also critical for the overall development of children, especially their social development (Harrower, 1999). Individuals develop their social skills by observing the actions of others. Appropriate behavior, self-direction, and task engagement are behavioral outcomes that increase during student interactions (Kuntz & Carter, 2019). Peers therefore play a critical role in an individual's social development (Harrower). DeLay et al. (2016) also affirm the great influence that peers have on one another. This research states that through reinforcement, collaboration, and modeling, students can have a powerful effect on their peers.

Social development has been viewed with equal importance to a student's academic development (Harrower, 1999). For parents of special education students, the opportunity to interact socially and develop friendships is one of the greatest desires that parents may have for their child (Rossetti & Keenan, 2017). Students, therefore, need peer interactions and friendships to develop their overall well-being (Schaefer et al., 2016). In fact, friendship development is a primary goal for students with disabilities (English, Goldstein, Shafer, & Kaczmarek, 1997).

Social Skills Deficit

Social skills are necessary factors in creating relationships with other people. When a person lacks social skills, it is referred to as having a social skills deficit. According to Hutchins et al. (2016), social skill deficits are either skill based, or performance based. Social skill deficit refers to a skill that an individual has not yet learned, whereas social performance deficit refers to a skill that an individual has learned but chooses not to use it. Individuals may also display social interaction skill deficits that could include a lack of initiating interactions, inferring meaning, and/or maintaining reciprocity (Hutchins et al.). Social skill deficits can therefore affect both the academic and social development of a student along with his/her educational experience (Hart & Banda, 2018).

People who lack social skills may not be able to communicate effectively nor may they be able to create positive personal relationships in which to enhance their lives. Students who are in special education have some form of disability and therefore may be lacking in various areas of social development. Students in special education typically struggle to interact and form peer relationships (Schaefer, Cannella-Malone, & Brock, 2017). In addition to their personal disabilities, people with social skill deficits are often isolated or segregated (Kelly, 2017). This isolation is a hinderance for their social development and decreases the chances of the critical

interactions they need to develop their social skills. Students in special education, therefore, need additional support to help create these interactions with their peers (Simpson & Bui, 2016).

Benefits of Interaction

A child's well-being is dependent on the social and peer relationships in which the child participates (Schaefer et al., 2017). Friendships are an important factor in various aspects of a person's life. Friends can influence one's beliefs and interests (Chow, Kiuru, Parker, Eccles, & Salmela-Aro, 2018). Chow et al. state that the influence of a friend can also have a determining factor on a student's scholastic development and motivation. Student effort on learning activities may be in direct correlation to that of his or her friend (Rossetti & Keenan, 2017). Rossetti & Keenan conclude that friendship also leads to increased interpersonal skills and a healthy social development. Schools therefore play a major role in creating an environment for a child's social development.

Although the majority of students in special education have lower than average social development, resulting in difficulty interacting in social situations, research has found that interaction is needed to help close the gap. The inclusion of a student in special education into a learning environment with their typical peers is a determining factor in the student's overall social development (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015). In fact, Garrote & Dessemontet asserted that one of the primary goals of inclusive education is the improvement of social participation of students in special education.

A study performed by Taheri, Perry, & Minnes (2016) also identifies the importance of increasing the social and participation of students who are in special education. The study shows that although students with disabilities tend to lack friendships, they do, however, have a desire for those connections. This research leads to the understanding that the social skills which are

needed to form and maintain personal relationships must be a priority in the education of all students. Because of this, years of research and practice continues to focus on increasing personal relationships for students with disabilities (Leighes, Kleinert, & Carter, 2017).

Students without disabilities have also expressed interest in becoming friends with their peers who have disabilities (Leighes et al., 2017). Students reported that they would like to learn how to interact with their peers who have disabilities. Leighes et al. state that these students would also like to help assist their peers in their personal, academic and social growth. Therefore, the social skills that are needed to form and maintain personal relationships must be a priority in the education of all students.

Themes in the Literature

Intentional Interactions

Despite the difficulties that students with disabilities experience socially and developmentally, interactions between people are important for personal development (Rossetti & Keenan, 2017). Social interactions are needed to practice and develop social skills along with other aspects of social development. In order to socially interact, students with disabilities need to have the opportunities to do so with their typical peers. Some students with disabilities, however, are in general education classrooms for a limited amount of time during each school day (Schaefer et al., 2017). Although students with disabilities are provided the opportunities to integrate with their peers, statistics show that these students spend over 83% of their time outside of the general education classrooms (Asmus et al., 2017).

Social interaction is an integral part of the school experience (Rossetti & Kennan, 2017). Simply including students with disabilities in the general education classroom, however, will not guarantee that social interactions will take place (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015; Hochman et al.,

2015; Simpson & Bui, 2016). Studies have also shown that few interactions take place for the students who are integrated into the general education classroom (Schaefer et al., 2017).

Simpson & Bui found that increasing the proximity of students with disabilities to students without disabilities will not necessarily lead to social interaction among peers either. Even when special education students are integrated into a general education classroom, segregation for these students may still be an issue (Asmus et al., 2017). As participants of an inclusive classroom, students with severe disabilities are commonly secluded (Rossetti & Keenan).

Friendship is a component of social development that can easily be overlooked for students with disabilities. This factor is especially true at the middle school and high school levels when class schedules may present conflicts for personal interactions (Hughes et al., 1999). Studies show that friendships between students with and without severe disabilities are rare (Rossetti & Keenan, 2017). The interactions that do take place are generally one-sided. One reason for this lack of friendship may be that few students with disabilities participate in after school activities. The lack of participation may be due to issues with transportation, parental resources, or available options in which to participate (Leigers et al., 2017). Research indicates that less than 25% of students with severe disabilities interact socially with friends outside of the school day (Rossetti & Keenan).

Paraprofessional Hinderance

The increase of inclusion has instigated questions of how to best assist special education students in accessing the content and learning in the general education classroom (Carter et al., 2015). Often paraprofessionals are assigned to provide support and assistance for special education students when participating in general education classes. This arrangement however may not be in the best interest for the special education students. Studies are challenging the

paraprofessional support arrangement of the current educational system (Carter et al.). Evidence-based practices are concluding that other options should be considered when determining appropriate interventions for the inclusion of special education students (Hutchins et al., 2016).

Studies have revealed that the assistance of a paraprofessional for special education students during interactions with their peers may be detrimental. The constant presence of the paraprofessional may impede peer interactions (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattey, & Raley, 2015). Brock et al. also state that this is especially true during the adolescence years when peer relationships increase in importance. The presence of a paraprofessional may even create ostracization of the student s/he is assisting (Simpson & Bui, 2017). Carter et al. (2015) deem that paraprofessionals' participation, therefore, may be a hinderance to the socialization of the students in special education.

Carter et al. (2015) conducted a study to compare students in special education who receive assistance from paraprofessionals to those who receive assistance from their peers. The research focused on peer interactions, academic engagement, social participation, and friendship. The pivotal conclusion of this study indicated that students receiving peer support arrangements had greater results in all areas that were addressed in this research (Carter et al., 2015). These results motivate educators to reevaluate the current system which uses paraprofessionals to assist students in special education in the inclusion process (Brock et al., 2015).

Necessary Interventions

Peer support interventions are ways to provide assistance to students in special education. These evidence-based approaches enhance inclusion for all students and promote peer interactions (Schaefer et al., 2017). These interventions provide interaction training for students with and without disabilities. They provide peer-mediated strategies to help students who have

disabilities interact with their peers without relying on adults for assistance (Simpson & Bui, 2017).

Peer support arrangements consist of a student requiring special education services and two to three typical peers who provide the student with both academic and social support (Leigers et al., 2017). The typical peers are taught how to provide appropriate assistance for their specific classmate. Peer support arrangements have been found to overcome the barriers that have been known to hinder social development for students with disabilities (Brock et al., 2015).

Research shows that during peer support interactions the student requiring the services gains both academic and social skills (Leigers et al., 2017). Likewise, Leigers et al. state that peer interactions contribute to personal growth and friendship for the students who are providing the services. All participants, therefore, experience increased interactions with peers that they might not have interacted with normally (Carter et al., 2015). Research states that these interactions can then be extended outside of the classroom with their peers using the social strategies that have been taught and practiced (Schaefer et al., 2017).

Intervention Examples

Reading Buddies is an example of a peer-mediated intervention used to combine social interaction into academic learning (Simpson & Bui, 2017). Reading Buddies participate in a shared reading activity during which they discuss and answer questions together about their reading. Shared reading is recognized as a valuable method of increasing fluency and comprehension, and other necessary reading skills. This program is also known to increase positive social interactions between peers. The Reading Buddies program can also be expanded to include students in special education. Simpson & Bui indicate that the program and activities have been found to increase the literacy development as well as the social development of these

students. It provides an important foundation in which these skills can be practiced and improved. Reading Buddies is an intervention program that increases the social interactions and promotes important foundational social and academic skills for students in special education.

Circle of Friends is a support-based intervention focused on the social participation of children with social and emotional needs (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015). In this program, multiple typical children volunteer to meet weekly with a child who has a disability. These friends join together to support the student with any social problems s/he is feeling or experiencing. Together they identify and implement solutions to these problems. An adult facilitator is also present to assist and provide support for the group when needed. This intervention was found to increase the social interaction of students with social and emotional needs (Garrote & Dessemontet). Based on a qualitative study, Garrote & Dessemontet found that Circle of Friends also created greater acceptance of the students with disabilities by their classmates.

Special Friends is an intervention that utilizes the participation of a whole class (Meyer & Ostrosky, 2016). This is a multi-tiered program that uses evidence-based practices to support peer relations and interactions for students with and without disabilities. It includes the introduction of age-appropriate themes related to disability content. This program uses understanding and inclusion as a base for establishing peer relationships with students with disabilities. It provides consistent peer interaction opportunities that increase the development of friendship for both the students with and without disabilities. Special Friends is an accomplished intervention for promoting acceptance for students with disabilities (Meyer & Ostrosky).

Peer support arrangements is another type of intervention that focuses on increasing interactions for students with disabilities (Leigers et al., 2017). This program consists of two to

three students from a general education classroom who offer support, both academically and socially, to a student with a disability. Academically, they help the student stay on task and prompt the student to answer questions when appropriate. They also summarize key concepts and help the student organize his or her materials. Socially, they ensure that the student is included and participates in group projects and helps to initiate conversations. Peer support arrangements enhances both the academic and social performances of students with disabilities providing increased skills and friendships (Leigers et al.).

Social-emotional learning (SEL) interventions are created to increase the social development of students with disabilities (DeLay et al., 2016). These types of interventions assist students in understanding appropriate social behaviors as well as implementation of these appropriate behaviors. They may include instruction and assistance regarding self-regulation skills as well as guidance on personal relationship skills with their classmates. Research from SEL programs indicate an increase of collaboration skills and learning for participants. These practices then lead to positive peer influences for students with disabilities. Overall, SEL interventions provide significant gains in not only the social and emotional skills of students with disabilities, but also in their behaviors, attitudes, and academic performances (DeLay et al.).

Peer Buddies is an intervention that helps students with disabilities experience a complete integrated classroom (Copeland et al., 2002). Integrated classrooms were designed to provide students with disabilities access to all areas of learning, both academically and socially. Students with disabilities, however, tend to need additional support in order to maximize their integrated classroom experiences. Peer Buddies is a program that assists with this progress. The support that the typical students provide to their peer buddies will vary depending on individual needs and desires. Assistance may be provided to help teach peers appropriate interactions or to help

peers complete their assignments. In return, some of the Peer Buddies programs even provide elective credits for the typical students who participate and assist in the program. Participants also indicate how their perceptions and abilities have grown and benefited from their participation in the program. Peer Buddies interventions create an overall enhancement of the integration system in multiple areas and for the various types of students in our school system (Copeland et al.).

Application

Social development is an essential aspect of the human developmental process (Kelly, 2017). In order to develop properly, individuals need to be provided with opportunities to practice their social skills (Harrower, 1999). People must first be introduced to the appropriate actions for specific social situations. Next, they need to be trained to produce the acceptable conduct if they are not able to pick up on them through observation. Individuals will then need to implement these skills and actions in a variety of contexts. These experiences will help a person feel more comfortable with these skills as well as expand their social knowledge and ability in different situations (Simpson & Bui, 2017). Each opportunity in turn leads to an individual's continued growth of his or her personal social development.

Inclusion is necessary for true social development to occur (Harrower, 1999). Being able to relate to a variety of people in various situations is the pinnacle of an individual's social development. Inclusion helps to provide these opportunities of growth for students with disabilities. Research shows that peer mediated programs also aide in this process by providing a means to teach individuals with disabilities the proper social skills needed for different situations (Garrote & Dessemontet, 2015).

Lunch is an opportune time for inclusion and peer interactions to occur. It is a relaxed environment where students can engage with each other and enjoy one another's company. Students can practice the social skills they are taught in the classroom with their peers in a less stressful situation (Simpson & Bui, 2017). This context also expands their experience to other people they might encounter in everyday situations.

As a special education teacher my role is to be an advocate for my students. I am to make sure that each individual IEP is completely followed. Some of my students have social skill goals they need to work on. I am also responsible for making sure that least restrictive environment (LRE) laws are being followed for my students. It is my job to ensure that my special education students are not only being included, but that they are provided opportunities to practice their social skills each school day.

Special education teachers can promote the social development of their students by making sure that schools and teachers are following inclusion laws. It is a special educator's job to be the voice of and the advocate for the students on his/her caseload. Some specific ways that teachers can provide an environment that is conducive to social development is implementing interventions that are known to generate social interaction. Studies show that interventions, based in research and with peer support as the common thread, are the most effective for cultivating the social development of a student in special education (Schaefer et al., 2017).

Conclusion

From the evidence provided, social development occurs at a greater extent for students with disabilities when it is facilitated by peers versus paraprofessionals (Carter et al., 2015). Most schools, however, continue to implement paraprofessionals to assist students with

disabilities during school hours. Evidence-based practices concerning social development, therefore, are not being used to determine best practices for the students with disabilities.

The social development of individuals in special education is not a new topic. Social development affects all areas of a person's life and is important for individuals with and without disabilities. Most of the data available on social development interventions focuses on the academic areas and learning situations. Social development, however, occurs in everyday situations as well. Studies regarding the social development of students with disabilities, therefore, need to be expanded to include a variety of situations, including those during non-academic times. Situations involving free or down time would provide valuable information in regard to the social development of students with disabilities (Hochman et al., 2015).

A lunch buddy program is an intervention that promotes social interactions among students with and without disabilities (Hochman et al., 2015). It creates an enjoyable atmosphere where friendships are shared among peers. This research-based intervention breaks down walls and creates a true atmosphere of inclusion. A lunch buddy program, therefore, is an admirable way to increase the social skills and overall development of students in special education.

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