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Everyone Likes to Hang Out and Kind of Meet New People: Descriptions of Social Inclusion in College

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Introduction

In the postsecondary education (PSE) community, the inclusion of individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) in postsecondary education is viewed as a human right with benefits that extend through campus communities (Jones et al., 2015; Kelty, 2014). Inclusion in a PSE community requires a minimum of two socially engaged partners (e.g., friends, classmates, club members, etc.). Direct accounts from social participants offer insights into the construction, meaning, and perceived impact of social interactions as they relate to PSE for students with I/DD.

This study used participatory methods that recognize the capacity of all individuals to evaluate and change their circumstances and can provide pathways for isolating and decoding experiences. These methods have been described as effective in PSE environments (Paiewonsky, 2014). The accounts and recommendations featured in this Fast Facts were extracted from a larger mixed-methods study that also included survey and focus group data from peer supports. The methods, analyses, and results of that study are being prepared for publication and are not included here.

Methods

Photovoice is a participatory data collection procedure developed to amplify voices typically marginalized in society and research. Participant researchers photograph their experiences and describe, for research, the meaning embedded within selected images. One PSE program facilitated a Photovoice experience for students to evaluate their college experiences. Using smartphones, tablets, and digital cameras, six college students with I/DD photographed salient social experiences in the campus community. The images facilitated semi-structured discussions between students and a faculty collaborator. By photographing and describing social interaction and isolation, students made meaning of their social experiences and defined the parameters of their social inclusion.

Social Inclusion in the Campus Community

Conceptualization of social inclusion (what)

Projecting self-worth, students commonly described themselves as capable adults, citing their ability to balance college studies, work, and contributions to the greater community. As a prerequisite for

inclusive interactions, students wanted to know that their abilities to contribute meaningfully to relationships and activities were acknowledged by peers on campus. Attributed worth and self-worth functioned reciprocally, and each was required for a social inclusion.

Students knew they were important when invited to participate in events and were introduced to new peers. When peers co-planned future social engagements, this signaled, for the students, a commitment to lasting social interaction.

Holly, a 23-year-old student, described the importance of "getting included in some of the conversation and being asked if they can eat lunch with me even if they are not with me [as a support] at the time." Frequent and high-quality social interactions, a defining hallmark of friendship, implied that social partners were mutually appreciated and respected over time.

Partly affect ("I *feel* like I belong") and partly declaration ("I *am* part of a family here. The [college] family. We help each other a lot"), a sense of belonging was also a criteria for social inclusion. Students described being part of a collective in which their commonalities with others outnumbered their differences.

Students provided a range of evidence that they belonged. One 22-year-old described how greetings from other students made him feel part of a large community. He said, "Anywhere I go to, when I walk, there are people that I don't know and they don't know me. They'll be like, 'Hey, how are you doing?' and 'What's your name?' You know, they're just friendly. They just want to know who you are."

Participation in formal (e.g., fraternity, diversity committee) and informal (e.g., bi-weekly lunch group) clubs provided students with a sense of membership, which is a type of belonging. As Zeke said about his fraternity, "You fit in really well with these guys. It's like you don't have a disability and that really makes yourself proud." In these situations, students described a sense of comfort, confident enough in their membership that they let down their guard without fear of losing social status.

Conditions for social inclusion (when)

Social inclusion was most often described in terms of acknowledged worth and belonging to something greater than oneself. These criteria were more likely to be met under some conditions than others.

The bulk of students' days on campus were spent engaging in structured activities such as class, skill development, or work, where social interactions with professors, tutors, or employers were often asymmetrical (with one person holding a position of greater power). However, segments of each day were allotted for informal interactions and chances to hang out without monitoring goals or following an agenda, and these were the moments when closeness, or burgeoning closeness, were most frequently described.

Meals provided respite from a regimented schedule, and were often defined more by the social nourishment they provided than the nutritional. Meals facilitated social experimentation. Acquaintances grew into friendships as food was shared, and levels of social investment were probed (i.e., students determined if others' engagement was required or desired).

Coordinators of social inclusion (who)

Students acknowledged contributions of the campus environment (attitudinal and social) and the PSE program in building social opportunities, but they typically identified themselves as the primary agents of inclusion. Students felt it was incumbent on them to initiate and coordinate social plans. As Kerri, a 22-year-old, said, "It helps me to stay connected, like if I want to do something I can call a friend and see if they are able to do it."

Students sent invites through text, phone, or email, and then scheduled activities with college peers whom they described as "welcoming," "inviting," "open," "helpful," and "nice."

The PSE program coordinated some social interactions and opportunities, but natural supports, or interactions with peers unaffiliated with the PSE program, were described as essential for social network expansion. Holly described it this way: "It's like we go around and people seem to know us because our supports talk about us to their friends…and then their friends…will hang out with us and get to know us better."

Initial partnerships between students, peer supports, and the program formed the basis for successful participation in academic and career development contexts, but then students often developed the confidence and skills required to fade support. The social environment was often the same: with individualized training, students became more adept at developing and maintaining social relationships.

PSE Program Recommendations

PSE programs strive to increase employability and skills for independent living (Grigal, Hart, & Weir, 2012). Social skills training infrequently includes strategies for strengthening and sustaining social relationships. Social participation is often a goal (e.g., I want to go to a concert with my friends), and its accomplishment requires planning, organization, attention, and time management—all executive functioning skills.

Programs can teach ways to independently and sustainably arrange social interaction. Steps might include, for example:

1. Identifying friends
2. Finding a method to contact friends
3. Contacting friends with an invitation that includes a time and date,
4. Coordinating transportation
5. Honoring commitments
6. Engaging in mutually rewarding social experiences
7. Making future plans

Strategies can be individualized at each step in the process, and college is a perfect environment for trying out and evaluating new skills.

PSE programs can also offer opportunities for students to evaluate their social circumstances in the college community. With training, all students have the capacity to serve as participant researchers and evaluators. Students, as experts of their social experiences, can educate program staff and the campus community about structures that are supportive or detrimental to social opportunity.

PSE programs can build student awareness of the committees, councils, or boards most colleges have that are dedicated to diversity and inclusion on campus. Participatory evaluation creates a mechanism for students to organize and communicate their findings to these diversity boards.

Students constructed social inclusion by reflecting on identities, relationships, actions, and contexts. In the process, knowledge production became inclusive, and students used results for advocacy. For example, students gained primary ownership over their activity schedules, requiring them to configure a constellation of social events with various partners.

Participatory evaluation is not limited to social spheres. Barriers to participation, as well as assets, in work, academic, and transportation domains can be further explored through participatory evaluation. After all, students view themselves as contributors, able to positively impact the community, and participatory evaluation provides them with the opportunities to do it.

Read the full study: Prohn, S. M. (2014). A grounded theory of social inclusion for postsecondary education students with intellectual disability (unpublished doctoral dissertation). North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC.

References

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