Don't Forget the Social Aspects of Inclusion

Martin E. Block

Students with disabilities never should be placed in general physical education solely for social development (NASPE, 1995). Yet, clearly one of the benefits of inclusion is the opportunity for social interactions between students with and without disabilities. Inclusion handled well can promote such social factors as learning how to interact with peers, playing cooperatively, taking turns, dealing with anger, following directions, listening quietly, staying on task, and behaving appropriately. For some children (e.g., some children with behavior problems), social development can be as important as motor and cognitive development in physical education; and, social goals should be addressed in the child’s Individual Education Program (IEP).

Unfortunately, the social aspects of inclusion are rarely addressed in general physical education. Simply placing a child with disabilities in general physical education will not ensure socialization. Furthermore, many physical educators unknowingly create situations that prevent the social development of students with disabilities. The purpose of this article is to highlight three problems that prevent socialization in inclusive physical education and how these problems can be overcome. Problems highlighted include: (1) teacher assistants, (2) when regular activities are inappropriate, and (3) when peers serve only as tutors and not as friends.

PROBLEM - 1

Teacher Assistants

Students with more severe disabilities often come to general physical education with a teacher assistant. These teaching assistants frequently know a lot about the student but very little about physical education. Furthermore, these well-meaning teacher assistants feel compelled to assist the student as much as possible. After all, that is their job! Unfortunately, teacher assistants who hover around a student with a disability unwittingly prevent the student’s interaction with peers without disabilities. It’s similar to placing a bubble around the student with disabilities. For example, when partnering up to do sit-ups in the resting area, how often is the teacher assistant partnered with the student with disabilities?

Similarly, peers often feel uncomfortable approaching the student with disabilities when there is a teacher assistant working with the student. For example, at a throwing station, a teacher assistant is instructing the student how to throw overhand. He or she also retrieves bean bags for the student to throw. Peers seeing this interaction may not want to interfere with the instruction that is taking place. The student also becomes very dependent on the teacher assistant in this activity.

SOLUTION - 1

Awareness Training

Teacher assistants want to do what is best. Therefore, teacher assistants need to be aware of the social aspects of inclusion. The best approach is to begin by informing all teacher assistants of the social aspects of inclusion. This awareness training can be accomplished in a group setting or one-on-one with each teacher assistant. The training can include discussions of the benefits of inclusion, social goals, and ways to promote social interaction. Additionally, teacher assistants can be given role-playing opportunities to practice interacting with students with disabilities in a social setting. By increasing awareness, teacher assistants can become more comfortable and confident in promoting social interaction with students with disabilities.
PROBLEM - 2

Regular Activities Are Inappropriate

In some cases, students with disabilities can't participate in a particular activity because of health/safety issues. While it may be appropriate to have the child off to the side doing a more appropriate activity, such separation from peers encourages isolation and prevents social interactions. For example, it may be unsafe for a tenth grader with cerebral palsy who uses an electric wheelchair to play soccer with his peers, or for a third grader with Down syndrome to participate in forward rolls during a tumbling unit. Yet, sitting off to the side and watching or playing by themselves is not an appropriate solution to the problem.

SOLUTION - 2

Involving Peers Without Disabilities

One relatively simple solution to this problem is to have peers rotate over to the student with a disability and participate with him or her in an alternative activity. Using the soccer example, each player in the soccer game is given a number from one to six. Because there are 30 students in the class, five players will have the number one, five will have the number two, and so on. At the number two's rotate out. Having interaction with peers as alternative activity creates opportunities for social interactions.

Another way to promote more interaction with peers which one class activity is inappropriate for students with disabilities is to add more activities. For example, a child with Down syndrome can't do forward rolls due to the possibility of a neck injury; yet, we were planning on having forward rolls, log rolls and strength activities (e.g., seal walks and crab walks). All the students in the class move between the forward roll station, log throw, and strength station. However, in this activity, the student does not rotate.

November/December 1998

STRATEGIES 31
in an activity like him (body awareness) with peers, to be part of an activity. The child with a disability who is working on motor and fitness skills, but has an opportunity to interact with peers, to wait turns, and to observe appropriate behavior. A child with a disability was placed on the side while the rest of the students were riding bicycles. While it should match what the other children in class are doing, this option isn’t always possible. Still, having peers participate with the student with a disability is critical for social interactions. For example, a third-grade class is learning softball skills, but a student with autism needs to work on learning how to ride a bicycle. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, the student works on that skill outside on the blacktop during regular physical education class. Once the physical education class is over, the student goes on to a bicycle-riding class. However, it’s important that the student be around peers. It’s also important for the student to see peers doing the same activity he or she is doing and, generally, to learn how to behave appropriately around peers. Using bicycles donated by the PTA, three students go outside and ride bikes, the student with autism. The two other riders are encouraged to talk to and socialize with the child with autism as much as possible. Similarly, the student with autism is encouraged to try to ride a bike and to watch his peers ride their bikes. After 10 minutes, these three children come back into class and three more children go outside to ride. By involving peers in the activity, the students in the above examples have opportunities to interact with and to observe the behaviors of peers without disabilities.

**Problem - 3**

**Peers Serve as Tutors and Not as Friends**

Using peers as tutors to facilitate inclusion has been promoted over the past several years (e.g., Block, 1998; Wilson, Lieberman, Horton, & Kasser, 1997). Peers are an inexpensive, readily available source of support for students with disabilities who need extra attention or extra help. However, if peers only serve in the role of tutor, there is an imbalance in the relationship. This imbalance promotes a feeling that students with disabilities always need help and are somehow “less than” students without disabilities. In addition, such imbalanced relationships can lead to lower self-esteem in students with disabilities (Sherrill, 1998).

**Solution - 3**

**Involving Peers as Friends**

Although peers can serve as tutors, create situations in which students with disabilities can serve as tutors, also. Known as the reciprocal style of teaching (Mosston & Ashworth, 1994) or classwide peer tutoring (Sherrill, 1998), the student with disabilities and a peer take turns serving as tutor and as the tutored student. This approach works particularly well with students with mild disabilities such as learning disabilities or behavior problems. As the one being tutored, the student with disabilities learns how to listen to and accept feedback. As a tutor, the student with a disability learns how to carefully observe others and to provide feedback in a “nice” way. Furthermore, taking turns as tutor and as the tutored student leads to more interactions and discussions between the two students. For example, a fourth grader with a behavior problem (doesn’t follow directions, hyperactive, can be belligerent) is paired...
with a peer in a classwide, peer-tutoring throwing activity. Students are given a score sheet with the components of the overhand throw, and each student takes a turn being the tutor (watching and giving feedback about the throw) and being the tutored student (performing the throw and listening to feedback).

The student with the behavior problem starts as the tutor. She or he is encouraged by the tutored student to watch her or his throw, paying particular attention to stepping with the opposite foot. The tutor watches the throw and gives immediate feedback following a script written out by the teacher: “Good throw, you stepped with the opposite foot.” The student is learning how to give feedback in a nice way, and also is learning through observation how to take feedback. After five throws the students switch roles. The student with a behavior problem now gets to throw and to receive feedback, but the student has seen a model of how to stay on-task, how to listen to feedback, and how to accept feedback properly.

Another solution to the imbalance of peer tutoring is to set up situations in which peers are simply friends and not tutors. For example, a ninth grader with fetal alcohol syndrome has motor delays (about 3 years delayed compared to peers) as well as behavior problems (short attention span, impulsive, hyperactive, lies a lot). The class is in a basketball unit, and in the past this student has been assigned a peer to help him or her stay on-task, follow directions, and generally stay with the group. However, the physical education teacher decides to do something new—have the entire class’ student’s “friend” by all students taking responsibility in helping the student stay on-task, and generally to behave more appropriately in physical education. The class discusses this new model to help “John” or “Sue” be more successful in regular physical education and their new roles are as friends, when students line up.

When the teacher is the组织实施 peer activities, a coach might remind the student of the order. During the basketball game, estimates guide the student where to stand, who to pass to, and not to play too rough on defense. The other team, aware that the student isn’t as skilled, allows him a little more room to pass and to shoot; and they don’t call traveling unless it’s blatant. This more subtle approach to helping the student provides more dignity and promotes a more natural delivery of support. Furthermore, the student has a chance to interact with all classmates rather than just one peer tutor.

Continued on page 34

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November/December 1998
HOT TOPICS

The Strategies Editorial Board wants to be sure that Strategies is covering topics you care about. If you have a great practice plan or teaching idea, send it in! Specifically, the board would like to receive articles about:

- Strength and conditioning for younger girls
- Fundraising for sports

See page 37 for submission guidelines and information about the review process.

Social Development

Many physical educators have been turned off by special educators saying, "Let's include the student in general physical education for socialization." While it's never appropriate to include a child in general physical education just for socialization, perhaps in our zeal to prevent such inappropriate inclusion we have forgotten about the importance of social development altogether! Quality physical education promotes motor, cognitive, and social development. These skills can be particularly important for students with disabilities who need work on social interactions and proper behavior. The purpose of this article was to review three typical barriers to social development in inclusive physical education, giving solutions to these barriers. While there isn't one particular solution that will work for every situation, this article will have likely heightened your awareness of a need to create an environment that facilitates rather than hinders socialization.

References


Martin E. Block is an associate professor at The University of Virginia, Health and Physical Education, Memorial Gym, Charlottesville, VA 22903, e-mail (meb7u@virginia.edu).
Column

5  Professional Practice—Scoliosis Screening
   How to perform scoliosis screenings using homemade posture analysis grids. JANICE CLARK YOUNG

8  Courtside—The United States Supreme Court and Sexual Harassment: Clarification of Issues
   A review of what physical educators should know about sexual harassment. LINDA JEAN CARPENTER

Features

11 “Winter Carnival Games” Teach Social Skills
   A creative approach to teaching social interaction skills during physical education. GERI EGIZI BORBE

13 Stress Busters for Coaches
   Strategies for coaches to reduce stress. TAMMY SCHILLING

16 Anger Management in the Gym
   How to teach students to use a four-step model for anger management. DONETTA J. COTHRAN

19 Cross-Training With Handball
   An activity for students to learn the fundamentals of other specific sports. CHRIS WIRSZYLA & RAY CURTIS

21 Reading Between the Lines—Interpreting Notes From Home
   How notes from home provide valuable information for physical educators. MURRAY MITCHELL

24 Box Hockey—A New “Old Game”
   An exciting cardiovascular fitness game for students at all levels. JOHN D. MCAFARThUR & ED SCANTLING

27 Using Randomized Drills to Facilitate Motor Skill Learning
   How to use randomized drills to balance time spent on drills and time playing the game. KELLIE GREEN HALL

30 Don’t Forget the Social Aspects of Inclusion
   How to address social interaction among students with and without disabilities. MARTIN E. BLOCK

On the Cover: Brent (left) and Shaun (right) Willingham play basketball. Photo by Mike Chew.

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