

EFFECTS OF MAINSTREAMING ADOLESCENTS WITH DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES IN A RESIDENTIAL SUMMER CAMP

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This study examines some of the effects that mainstreaming had upon eleven adolescents with developmental disabilities mainstreamed in a residential summer camp and on the "typical" campers with whom they were involved. More than half of the typical campers felt that this involvement had enhanced their summer and had positively affected their perceptions of people with handicaps. More than half of the campers with disabilities were perceived by their parents to have shown improvements in social, self-help, and cognitive skills after the four-week experience. Some of the possible reasons for these changes are discussed.

Summer recreational programs are becoming increasingly available for the developmentally disabled. Opportunities that have been offered to typical children for years are now more and more obtainable for the mentally retarded.

Just as the school system offers a variety of programs to meet the diverse needs of the developmentally disabled, so too are there many types of recreational programs. Some are day programs; others are residential. Some last only one or two weeks, and others the entire summer. Some focus only on recreational activities, and others also emphasize self-help or vocational skills. Some programs promote inclusion, others remain self-contained, and still others offer mainstreaming opportunities.

Although these programs are worthwhile just for the variety that leisure-time activities offers the children, one questions what effects such programs might have on the cognitive, social, and life skills of the participants. Can a short-lived program that is not part of an educational institution have a positive impact on its participants?

To date only a few studies have been conducted to examine this issue. Wetzel et al. (1995) found few dysfunctional and repetitive behaviors among youth with developmental disabilities attending a summer camp. Rynders et al. (1990) found increased social interaction among autistic children in a two-week integrated summer program. Brasten

(1977) found that more than half of those with moderate mental retardation were successful when integrated into regular residential summer camps. Bateman (1968) reported "measurable benefits" for children with mental retardation who attended a day camp.

Another related topic is the effect that mainstreaming or inclusion in a summer recreational program can have on the nonhandicapped participants. Does proximity in a noninformal setting positively or negatively affect the perceptions of peers? Again, there are few published studies that answer this question. Rynders and colleagues (1990), for instance, found that staff reacted positively to the integration of the three children with autism noted above, and there was an increased perception of friendship among the typical campers.

To explore the effects that a residential camping experience with mainstreaming opportunities can have on both the campers with and without handicaps, the study described in this article was undertaken. Following is a description of the program and the results of two questionnaires designed to examine how the experience affected all the campers involved.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Tikvah (Hebrew for hope) program at Camp Ramah, the Conservative movement's

residential camp, in Canada has been in operation for the past three summers. Like its sister programs in three other sites in the United States, the program offers Jewish teenagers with cognitive disabilities a summer camping experience with opportunities for integration. Each program differs in the population served and the manner in which integration takes place.

At Camp Ramah in Canada campers are offered both integration and parallel programming during the day. Integration is both formal and informal. The formal program includes participation with the 15-year-old typical campers in daily prayers four days a wee, seating among these campers during meals, and recreational and instructional swimming. In addition the campers in Tikvah participate with the 15-year-old unit in the unit play and song at the camp song festival. On Saturday afternoons volunteers from Magshimim (the name of the 15-year-old unit) are encouraged to invite campers in Tikvah to spend an hour with them engaged in informal activities, such as going for a walk, reading, or playing ball. Both the general staff and the other campers are told at the beginning of the season that Tikvah is not a unit unto itself, but is part of Magshimim (achievers).

Informal integration takes place throughout the day. All campers and staff are "inserviced" at the beginning of the session. Their questions about developmental disabilities are answered, and they are encouraged to interact with the campers in Tikvah as they feel comfortable. The Tikvah camper cabins are placed amidst all the other camper cabins. Typical campers have the opportunity to interact with the 350 other campers at Ramah throughout the day. Campers in Tikvah are also able to interact with others in the camp when they are involved in their daily "work" activities in the dining hall, office, laundry, or nursery.

Parallel programming addresses the unique needs and abilities of the campers in Tikvah. Just as the other boys and girls in Ramah participate in classes, sports, arts and crafts,

and Israeli dancing, so too do the campers in Tikvah. However, their activities are geared to their skills and interests.

PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

In the summer of 1995, eleven campers, four boys and seven girls, participated in Tikvah. They ranged from 14 to 21 years of age. All but one were in self-contained classes during the regular school year. Intellectually they displayed mild to moderate degrees of mental retardation. Five had Down syndrome, one had hydrocephalus at birth, one had cerebral palsy, and the others had cognitive problems of unknown etiology. All had some degree of motor impairment, but could move about the camp independently. Four had speech impairments that greatly hampered comprehension of their speech. (Phrase or sentence length was rarely more than one to three words.) Parents seemed to choose this program for their children for its integration opportunities, Jewish programming, or for respite.

Seven full- and part-time staff were assigned to the program. Two male and two female counselors were assigned to the cabins. One counselor served as a facilitator in the work sites. These counselors ranged in age from 18 to 21. One had completed several courses on learning disorders, and one other had been involved in a similar program in past summers. One additional staff member served as a Judaic studies teacher and assisted periodically during the day. I was the program director.

There were 50 campers in Magshimim, all of whom were 14 to 15 years of age and entering tenth grade. They came to camp from southern Ontario and Quebec, Northern Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Eastern Michigan. The vast majority had been in Camp Ramah at least one previous summer. For all the campers this was the first summer they were formally involved with Tikvah. None of these campers attended Ramah specifically because of their potential involvement with the Tikvah program.

QUESTIONNAIRE

Campers

On the second to last day of camp the Magshimim campers were asked to complete the following questions in writing:

1. Do you think your involvement with the campers in the Tikvah Program has changed your perception of children with handicapping conditions? Yes No
If yes, please explain.
2. Do you think your involvement with the campers in the Tikvah Program affected your enjoyment of camp? Yes No
If yes, please explain.
3. Do you think the campers in the Tikvah Program should be less/just as/more involved with Magshimim?
Please explain your answer.

All responses were anonymous. Campers were told there were no right or wrong answers and the purpose of the questionnaire was to evaluate the program and make plans for next year.

Parents

One week after the completion of camp, parents of the Tikvah campers received the following questionnaire in the mail and were asked to respond in writing:

1. Do you think your child's involvement in Tikvah has affected his/her:

a. Social Skills	Yes	No
b. Self-Help Skills	Yes	No
c. Cognitive/ Academic Skills	Yes	No

Space was provided for parents to comment and explain the reasons for their answers.

QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

Camper Questionnaire

Of the 50 campers who responded, 36 (72%) indicated that their experience with Tikvah had positively affected their percep-

tion of children with handicaps. The remaining 14 campers (28%) stated that their perceptions were not changed. None expressed any negative comments.

Twenty-three campers commented that this experience gave them new knowledge. Of these, eight indicated that they now had a greater awareness of developmental disabilities. Similarly, four said that they realized that these campers were not as different as they had expected, and three indicated that they now see that they are "regular guys." Seven said that the campers in Tikvah were more capable than they had expected, and one wrote that he realized that each camper in Tikvah is different. Of the remaining seven campers, two said they realize now that people with handicaps can be their friends, and five said that they are now more comfortable in their presence.

Concerning the second question about how the experience affected their enjoyment of camp, 29 of the Magshimim (58%) stated that their involvement had enhanced their camp experience, twenty wrote that their enjoyment was not affected, and one stated that involvement with children with developmental disabilities made him nervous.

An analysis of the comments section shows that twelve campers simply stated that the experience gave them a more enjoyable summer. Five said the program made them feel good, four commented that they were glad that they were doing a good deed, and three said they particularly enjoyed the Saturday afternoon buddy program. The remaining responses related to the enjoyment of specific integrated activities.

Illustrating perhaps the level of comfort in Magshimim, 38 (76%) felt the degree of integration was appropriate, 11 (22%) wanted more integration in the future, and only one camper had no opinion.

Parent Questionnaire

Eight of the eleven parents responded to the questionnaire within three weeks after the end of camp. In the Social Skills area five commented that they had seen improvement

in their children, and three said that they saw no change. The improvements included more confidence, increased interactions with others, better habits at mealtime, and increased calm.

In reference to self-help skills, six parents indicated that they had seen improvement, and two said that their child's behavior in this area remained the same. Improved skills included increased interest in sorting laundry, greater initiative, greater independence, and a greater desire to be on time.

Finally in the cognitive/academic sphere the same two parents saw no improvements. The other six felt their sons and daughters were displaying such behaviors as an increased attention span and an improvement in written and oral communication.

In all three spheres more than 50 percent of the campers had demonstrated gains after their month at camp.

DISCUSSION

In many ways a residential summer camp offers the perfect opportunity for implementing behavioral and attitudinal changes. Participants are available 24 hours a day, and the camp staff are free to structure the day to best facilitate change in an anticipated direction. Incentives, instructional materials, and affective tools are all at the disposal of the staff to enable the fulfilling of goals and objectives. In addition a summer camp program may not carry with it some of the negative attitudes students bring with them when they come to school daily. As a result students' attitudes and expectations may be more open to influence.

The results of the two questionnaires described above certainly illustrate the potential power of a structured camping experience. The vast majority of the typical campers commented that their integration experience had positively affected their perceptions of people with handicaps. More than half of the 15-year-old boys and girls added that this nearly four-week experience had enhanced their camping experience. Parents of the

developmentally disabled campers felt that their children's presence in the camp had resulted in improvements in social, self-help, and cognitive skills. No loss of skills was noted by any of the parents responding, even though there was no formal instruction in any of these areas.

The power of these results would, of course, be stronger if both the Magshimim and the Tikvah campers had been given formal assessment instruments both before and after camp. Such is not, however, concordant with the atmosphere of summer camp. Campers would chafe at the school-type experience of being formally tested. Nevertheless, these results indicate that integration in a summer recreational program can have powerful positive effects on all campers. Perhaps, with further supportive research, it might be recommended that such summer programs be made part of the educational program of children with handicapping conditions, even though there is no formal instructional component.

Future research should investigate whether the changes noted by parents are observed in school. The relative effects of partial integration and total inclusion on attitudes and skills also need to be explored.

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