Article:
Historically, recreation programs for children with developmental disabilities have not been characterized by equity or excellence. In the past, the development of recreation skills among children has occurred most often in either self-contained schools or residential environments. Many of these programs have focused on a limited set of activities such as bowling, swimming, arts and crafts, and field trips (Schleien & Werder, 1985); have been offered for only one to two weeks (often during summer vacation); and, when available in community settings, often require that children with disabilities be segregated from those who are not disabled. When interactions with nondisabled children in "integrated" programs do occur, participation is characterized by strictly hierarchical, vertical role relationships. Often in these relationships, the nondisabled child is the helper and the participant with disabilities is the recipient of help.

Events such as Special Olympics and "Special Kids Day" at the county fair often fall into this category. While such programs can be beneficial, if they are the only options available, opportunities for learning from peers without disabilities is curtailed and the "we-they" mentality is reinforced (Schleien & Meyer, 1988).

Recent federal and state mandates prohibit discrimination against children with disabilities. These legislative mandates have paved the way for children with developmental disabilities to live, learn, and engage in recreation activities in settings with their nondisabled peers. Public Law 94-142 clearly specifies that programming in the least restrictive environment should be achieved without sacrificing equity and excellence in services to nondisabled participants.

In a carefully planned, integrated recreation program, several programmatic concerns and constraints characteristic of segregated programs are alleviated. Generalization problems incurred when teaching children with developmental disabilities in contrived environments are reduced or eliminated. In integrated programs, skill instruction occurs directly in the setting in which skills will be used, eliminating the need for transferring competencies to criterion environments in the future (Rynders, Schleien, & Mustonen, 1990). Additionally, integrated programs become more cost-effective than segregated programs: children with disabilities ultimately need less staff time to acquire skills; and, since existing staff and facilities are used, fewer special support personnel, facilities, and equipment are required (Schleien, Olson, Rogers, & McLafferty, 1985).

Obstacles and Strategies to Integration
It has become commonplace for the community recreation professional to emphasize those aspects of programming which could inhibit or prevent successful recreation participation by children with disabilities. Those barriers have also been identified in a number of studies, including one commissioned by the National Recreation and Park Association (Vaughan & Winslow, 1979). More recent studies examine approaches to identify and alleviate common barriers (Smith, 1985) through data-based studies of specific disability groups (West, 1984), park and recreation organizations (Austin, Peterson, Peccarelli, Binkley, & Laker, 1977; West, 1982) and by examining relationships between organizations which provide community recreation programs (Schleien & Werder, 1985; Wheeler, Lynch, & Thom, 1984).
Schleien and Werder (1985), in their study of perceived responsibilities of special recreation services in Minnesota, found that community recreation programs provided by municipal park and recreation, community education, and schools often were piecemeal and uncoordinated. Generally, each agency assumed the other was responsible for providing community recreation programs to persons with disabilities. Findings pointed out the need to further investigate the roles of those agencies and the importance of networking across agencies.

A recent survey of 46 community recreation professionals within a large midwestern metropolitan area was conducted to determine those barriers which have prevented or inhibited integration of recreation programs (Schleien & Ray, 1988). The respondents (i.e., center directors) identified barriers which could be generally grouped in these areas:

1. Problems in the definition and location of "special populations";
2. Identification of needs and preferences;
3. Staff qualifications and needs;
4. Negative attitudes;
5. Current program practices (segregated, infrequent, competitive); and,
6. Absence of physical (e.g., transportation, equipment) and fiscal resources.

Here, two programs are described that feature equity and excellence in leisure services.

**An Integrated Art Museum Environment**

The site for the integrated art programming intervention was Kidspace, a children's art gallery and studio occupying one floor of the Minnesota Museum of Art in St. Paul, Minnesota. Over a three-year period, separate programs, each with a slightly different emphasis, were conducted (Schleien, Rynders, & Mustonen, 1988). Participants with disabilities were diagnosed as autistic, severely mentally retarded, or multiply physically disabled.

Projects were designed that emphasized the use of art as a leisure activity, rather than as a strictly academic activity. Art activities occurring in the studio were designed to teach students that the elements of line, shape, color, and texture could be manipulated in various ways to produce three-dimensional objects (e.g., models of buildings, sculptures, animals). Children were taught through a series of sequential instructional activities to look for the basic art elements in the gallery exhibits and during studio demonstrations, and then to create their own art product. Participants created a "Fantasy City" made of construction paper, tissue paper, boxes, egg cartons, fabric scraps, and other materials; created their own "Kidspace," joining large cardboard panels into a "room" using paint, tissue paper, fabric, and other materials to add color and texture; and were encouraged to create a series of small sculptures from everyday materials.

Attitudes of the nondisabled participants toward students with severe disabilities were measured via a pre- and post-test using Voeltz' Acceptance Scale (1982). Results indicated a positive and significant attitude change in participants without disabilities. Results also showed that students with disabilities engaged in appropriate social behavior approximately 75 percent of the time during art museum activities. Positive social interaction bids that the nondisabled students directed toward their peers with disabilities also increased significantly. The frequency of positive interaction bids that nondisabled peers directed toward the younger and older students with autism showed particularly strong (and significant) increases. Positive interaction bids that students with disabilities directed toward their nondisabled peers also increased slightly.
Various social behavior categories of students with and without disabilities were evaluated. Cooperative behaviors of students with disabilities and nondisabled peers increased slightly throughout the course of the museum visits. Appropriate behaviors of students with disabilities remained high during museum activities and during the integrated art class at the students’ school. Three students with disabilities acquired the functional art skills of cutting, gluing, and painting. The remaining three students who had severe motor and sensory impairments exhibited minimal increases in the acquisition of art skills.

This project validated various methods to integrate children with and without disabilities into school and after-school leisure environments. The integration facilitation methods that were implemented, including the involvement of trainer advocates, their subsequent use of contingent social reinforcement, companionship training, and cooperatively structured activities, were considered essential in producing socially valid results (e.g., friendship development, attitude change, overall systems change).

**A Youth-Serving Agency's Approach to Integration**

Since October 1984, the Jewish Community Center UCC) in St. Paul, Minnesota has sponsored an integrated special needs program for children and youth, six months to 21 years old, with intellectual and physical disabilities. When the program began, two children with special needs were integrated into aquatics classes. Today the program serves nearly 50 youngsters with disabilities each year in a full range of social and recreational programs of their choice, including swimming, gymnastics, theatre productions, summer day camp, after-school day care, woodworking, dance, and many others (Heyne, 1987).

The key to the success of the integrated special needs program has been inclusion on an agency-wide scale. The system's change, which has enabled the JCC to achieve widespread integration, has required active and coordinated involvement from several key players: (1) the board of directors, (2) a special needs lay committee, (3) administrators, (4) supervisory and instructional staff, (5) trainer advocates, (6) children and youth with disabilities and their families, (7) the nondisabled community, and (8) a fulltime integration coordinator (i.e., certified therapeutic recreation specialist).

The beginnings of the program illustrate the deliberate, system-wide approach to facilitating integration at the JCC. In the spring of 1984, administrators noticed several children with special needs who were coming to the JCC with their families, but who were not actively involved in structured, regularly scheduled programming. Administrators called an open meeting of parents of children with special needs to determine the needs of their children and how the JCC might best respond to them. At that meeting, parents agreed that opportunities were already available in the community for their children to participate in segregated activities. Their children needed integrated options.

With support from administrators and the board of directors, funding was sought and secured through the Minnesota Developmental Disabilities Council . A Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialist (CTRS) was hired, and the process of involving youngsters with disabilities in regular programming commenced. Through the daily intervention of the integration coordinator, JCC staff were trained in how to include youngsters with disabilities in their programs and classes. Trainer advocates were recruited to assist children with disabilities, one-on-one, in programs as needed. Nondisabled peers were educated about individual differences and taught ways to interact with and include youngsters with disabilities in activities. To oversee integration efforts, a lay committee comprising leaders in the community, parents, and professionals was formed. This committee discussed and set policy regarding such issues as eligibility criteria for participants, agency membership for families with children with special needs, accessibility at camp, and funding resources. Most importantly, youngsters with disabilities were beginning to participate successfully and actively in mainstream community activities.

The benefits of integration at the JCC have been demonstrated in several ways. In programs where skill acquisition was the primary priority, leisure skill competencies of the youngsters with disabilities were tracked from week to week during the course of a program quarter. These data documented that children and youth with
disabilities demonstrated competencies in acquiring swimming, gymnastics, camping, basketball, karate and video game skills, among others. Through these programs, social interaction skills and friendships were also developed by the children with disabilities. In some cases, these relationships have gone beyond involvement in programs at the JCC. Children with and without disabilities have exchanged phone numbers, visited each other's homes, and attended each other's birthday parties. 

The benefits of integration for the children and youth with disabilities can probably best be understood through the comments of parents. At the end of every integrated program quarter, parents were asked to complete parent satisfaction questionnaires regarding how they think integration worked for their children. Parents consistently reported that their children benefited from integration in terms of making friends, enjoying activities, developing self-confidence, becoming more independent, learning appropriate play behaviors, strengthening motor skills, and developing a sense of community. The JCC has become their children's neighborhood recreation facility, their place to go to meet friends and feel a part of the larger community.

The nondisabled community has also benefited from integration. Every summer for five years, pre- and postprogram attitude surveys have been administered to nondisabled children at the JCC day camp for grades K-6. Each summer, attitudes of the nondisabled children grew more accepting toward the children with disabilities. Additionally, from one summer to the next, positive attitudes were maintained, demonstrating the longitudinal effects integration has had on shaping positive attitudes of nondisabled children.

Integration has also had an impact on regular program staff at the JCC. On pre- and posttest program attitude assessments, staff have indicated that integration has taught them not to be afraid of people with disabilities, that children with disabilities are disabled only to the extent that we perceive them to be disabled, and with careful planning, integration works for everyone's benefit.

When everyone is involved actively and positively in the integration process, from policy-makers and administrators to actual participants in the community, everyone benefits. Equity is attained. Excellence is achieved. Some day — in the not too distant future let us hope — equity and excellence in community recreation services will be available to all children.

References


