

Perceived Responsibilities of Special Recreation Services in Minnesota

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Editor's Note: It is the policy of Therapeutic Recreation Journal to refrain from publishing limited studies of the status of special recreation services on a state by state basis. However, the caliber of the current study and the potential application of its findings to other states led to an exception being made in the current case.

Abstract:

Recent federal legislation has established the right of individuals with disabilities to live, learn, and by implication, recreate in least restrictive environments. These initiatives have facilitated the move of large numbers of handicapped persons into community living situations, consequently shifting the responsibility of recreation programming to community agencies. To determine the quantity and quality of recreation programs and services throughout the state of Minnesota, the authors surveyed park and recreation departments, community education agencies, and schools via a needs assessment inventory. A 73% return enabled the authors to identify perceived responsibilities and the degree of coordination among agencies, and the extent and nature of special recreation services currently offered, including the integration of handicapped and nonhandicapped participants.

KEY WORDS: Community Education, Handicapped, integration, Needs Assessment, Parks and Recreation, Schools, Survey, Therapeutic Recreation

Article:

The rationale for the development of community recreation opportunities for handicapped individuals has been well established from both a theoretical (i.e., normalization) and a practical (i.e., deinstitutionalization) standpoint (Wolfensberger, 1972). Federal legislation (e.g., P.L. 94-142) which mandated the right of handicapped individuals to live and learn in least restrictive environments has resulted in large numbers of handicapped individuals being moved from institutional settings to community living situations. The deinstitutionalization and normalization movements have shifted the responsibility of recreation programming from residential institutions and self-contained classrooms to community agencies (Bates & Renzaglia, 1979). Accordingly, the need for a comprehensive community service delivery system of leisure and recreation programming for handicapped individuals has been increasingly articulated in the literature (Brown, et al., 1980; McGregor, 1982).

While the premise of the handicapped individual's right to full recreation opportunities seems widely accepted, the mechanisms for implementing such ideology remain unclear. One interpretation of full community service delivery is one of shared responsibility. Figure 1 illustrates a transagency approach toward recreation service delivery to handicapped individuals involving three agency types: (a) park and recreation agencies, (b) community education agencies, and (c) public schools.

Several studies have identified a lack of awareness of park and recreation agencies concerning their responsibilities as service providers to special populations (Austin, et al., 1977; Edginton, Compton, Ritchie, & Vederman, 1975; Schleien, Porter, & Wehman, 1979). While community service agencies and public schools acknowledge their responsibility to provide services and education for handicapped individuals, their specific

responsibilities for providing leisure and recreation programming for handicapped persons are vague at best. Other than occasional references to voluntary agencies (e.g., Y.M.C.A.), clubs (e.g., 4-H), residences (e.g., group homes), community education agencies, and schools providing recreational services to special populations, the literature does not reveal any systematic study concerning the shared responsibility for providing recreation opportunities to handicapped citizens as demonstrated in the trans-agency model in Figure 1.

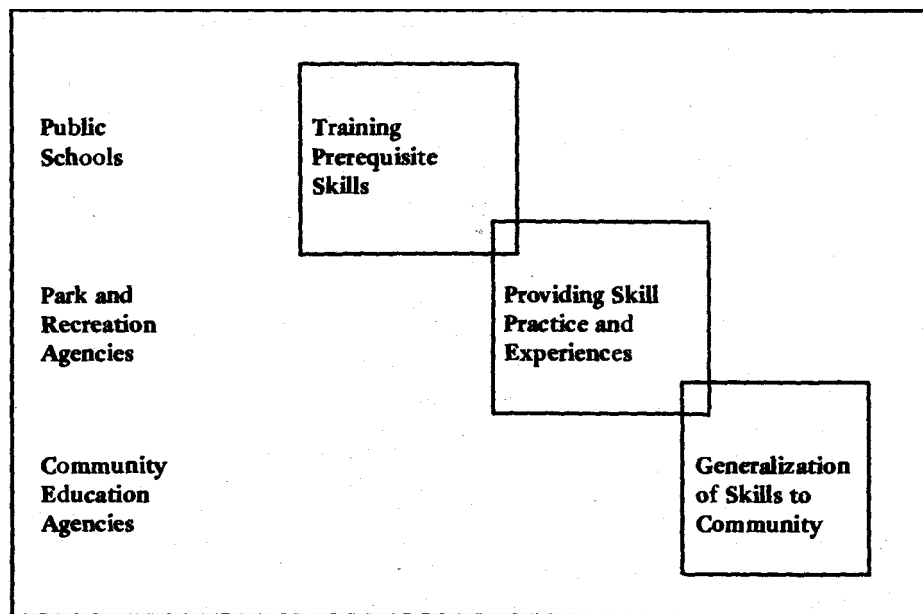


FIGURE 1. TRANSAGENCY MODEL OF RECREATION SERVICE DELIVERY FOR DISABLED INDIVIDUALS.

In order to plan and implement a shared responsibility delivery system of recreation services for handicapped individuals, current status must first be defined. The Division of Recreation, Park, and Leisure Studies at the University of Minnesota conducted this study to ascertain the status of leisure programs for handicapped individuals and perceived responsibilities among municipal recreation, public schools, and community education agencies. More specifically, this study was designed to answer these questions:

1. What is the nature of recreation services currently being provided to handicapped individuals, in terms of quantity and quality?
2. Which public agency types are providing recreation services, and to what extent?
3. To what degree are responsibilities for recreation services shared among agencies?
4. To what extent do agencies provide specially trained staff to plan and implement special recreation programs?

Although this study is limited in scope (i.e., Minnesota), these results will be useful in several ways. Positive elements of recreation programs for handicapped individuals revealed through the results of this study can serve as a model to other states and agencies. Results of this study may also reveal weaknesses in current special recreation services. More specifically, this study will help determine: (a) types of agencies which have and have not assumed responsibility for special recreation programs, (b) aspects of service delivery (facilities, transportation, etc.) which may have strengths and weaknesses, (c) degree of access to a wide variety of recreation activities, and (d) reasons for service adequacy or inadequacy. In this study, analysis of results should lead to the proposal for the development of a statewide shared responsibility plan to provide recreation services to handicapped individuals. Such a proposal would incorporate plans which build on current strengths and use a transagency approach to eliminate weaknesses in service delivery.

Method

Subjects

A needs assessment inventory was sent to each of 552 agencies offering educational, recreational, and other services to handicapped and nonhandicapped children and adults. Recreation leaders or other personnel designated by agency administrators were respondents to the inventories. Since the respondents participated on behalf of their respective agencies, agencies constitute subjects in this study. The three groups of agencies which served as subjects in this study included: (a) park and recreation agencies (i.e., tax-supported, neighborhood centers providing recreation and leisure services); (b) community education agencies (i.e., tax-supported, school-centered services providing recreational, educational, cultural, and social services to all segments of a community based on the needs of the community); and (c) educational programs serving mentally retarded students. Municipal park and recreation agencies totaled 105 agencies, all of those listed in the 1983 Minnesota Recreation and Park Association Membership Directory. Inventories were also distributed to all 309 community education agencies in Minnesota. All 138 educational agencies serving moderately and severely mentally retarded students listed with the Minnesota Department of Education represented the third agency group in the study.

Instruments

Two versions of a needs assessment inventory in survey format were developed for the study. The community survey was designed for distribution to both park and recreation agencies and community education agencies, while the education survey was developed for distribution to public school programs for moderately and severely handicapped students. The community survey was six pages in length and contained 23 closed-end items, with two items requesting contact information. The education survey was five pages long with 25 items, nine of which were open-ended questions. Each survey was accompanied by a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study and the need for information concerning recreation services for handicapped individuals.

The community survey was designed to investigate not only currently available recreation services, but the philosophies and attitudes of community recreation personnel regarding programs for handicapped individuals. This survey requested information in five categories: (a) demographic information and program characteristics, (b) perceived responsibility for providing recreation services to special populations, (c) programmatic features of current recreation services, (d) integration of recreation activities with nonhandicapped individuals, and (e) trends in future recreation services. Respondents were asked to indicate the reasons for not offering services to handicapped individuals if such programs did not exist, and to project their future needs for assistance in expanding and improving recreation services.

The education survey was designed to parallel and complement the community survey and was sent to supervisors of programs for moderately and severely handicapped students in public schools. Respondents were asked to provide information regarding the same five categories as in the community survey. This survey sought information regarding the extent to which recreation skills were taught in physical education and special education programs, and how such programs were integrated with nonhandicapped students. Additional items sought information regarding the amount of cooperation with community services. As in the community survey, respondents were asked to express their attitudes and needs for future assistance in the development of special recreation programs.

Procedure

The surveys were mailed to 552 community and educational settings with a requested return three weeks later. Following the return of 224 surveys, an identical follow-up mailing was forwarded to all those who did not initially respond with another three-week return request. An additional 181 surveys were returned, raising the total return rate to 73 percent. Responses were tallied, frequencies calculated, and percentages compiled for the analysis of responses to items in both surveys.

Results

Of the total 552 surveys sent to community and education agencies throughout Minnesota, 405 (73%) surveys

were completed and returned. Of the 105 park and recreation surveys and 309 community education surveys distributed, 68 (65%) and 255 (83%), respectively, were completed and returned. Of the 138 public school programs surveyed, 82 (59%) completed and returned surveys.

Demographic Data and Program Characteristics

Of the total 414 community surveys distributed to both park and recreation and community education agencies, 323 (78%) were completed and returned, of which the majority (66%) represented small communities with populations of less than 10,000. Both park and recreation and community education agencies indicated that elderly (66% and 68%, respectively) and mentally retarded (57% and 38%) persons were most frequently served in recreation programs, whereas individuals with other disabilities were served to a lesser degree (i.e., physically disabled, emotionally disturbed, correctional offenders, multi-handicapped) (see Table 1).

Public school respondents indicated that although school-age (6-21) children were being served in recreation programs, most (70%) of the programs served students at secondary grade levels (ages 13-21). When asked about the availability of special recreation programs, 173 (54%) of the community agencies (i.e., park and recreation, community education) offered year-round services. Schools provided recreation instructions on a wide variety of schedules, from occasional outings to daily instruction. Of these, over half of the respondents did not provide recreation skill instruction more often than twice a month.

Table 1.
Percent of Agencies Serving Special Populations and Ages Served

	Type of Agency		
	Park and Recreation	Community Education	Public Schools
Special Populations Served			
Elderly	66	68	—
Mentally Retarded	57	38	—
Physically Handicapped	38	23	—
Emotionally Disturbed	32	13	—
Multiply Handicapped	22	11	—
Adjudicated Offenders	11	16	—
Age of Individuals Served			
Under 13	49	69	54
13 and Older	68	87	70

Perceived Responsibilities

Respondents were asked their perceptions of agency responsibilities for providing recreation services to handicapped individuals. Most (78%) of the park and recreation agencies replied that community education programs should be primarily responsible, and 76% indicated that their own agencies should share in the responsibility. Even greater agreement (93%) was demonstrated among the community education agencies that park and recreation agencies should have primary responsibilities for providing special services, and all of the community education respondents stated that their own community education programs should share in the responsibility for special recreation programs.

When respondents were asked about shared responsibilities between community recreation/education agencies and public schools, 225 (70%) of the park and recreation and community education agencies indicated that they participate in cooperative efforts with public schools, whereas education respondents seemed relatively unaware of the available community recreation services. Less than 20% of the educators indicated awareness of swimming being available in community recreation programs, and revealed even less awareness of other available community recreation activities (e.g., crafts, bowling). Even though respondents clearly indicated that responsibilities for providing special programs should be shared among agencies, 33% of the community

agency respondents replied that their reasons for not providing services to special populations were because they believed that other agencies provided such services. Almost half (43%) of the respondents indicated that lack of funds was their reason for not providing special recreation services.

Programmatic Features

All of the school respondents indicated that the provision for training recreation skills was included within their school programs. Respondents of the education survey indicated, on open-ended items, that bowling (75%) and swimming (61%) were the most frequently provided recreational activities in school programs (see Table 2). When asked the selection criteria for recreation activities, 68 (83%) of the school respondents indicated that recreation activities were selected according to the teachers' choices, 76% indicated selection was based on available space, equipment, and time, whereas approximately one-third (35%) were based on student preferences. Public school respondents were asked to describe how recreation skills were incorporated within the school curriculum. Seventy-two (88%) indicated that recreation skills were taught within the physical education curriculum, while 44 (54%) stated that recreation instruction was incorporated as periodic, specially planned activities (e.g., outings). School respondents replied that the gymnasium was the most frequently (93%) used setting for teaching recreation skills.

When asked to respond to possible features of an ideal recreation program, a majority of community education and park and recreation respondents (57%) wanted activities based primarily on individual ability levels. Community education and park and recreation agencies presently providing programs for special populations indicated that most recreation activities fell into four categories: (a) games and sports, 69%; (b) entertainment and special events, 58%; (c) swimming, 46%; and (d) arts and crafts, 48% (see Table 3). Well over half (63%) of the community agencies indicated that they required individuals to provide their own transportation to and from the recreation facility, whereas only 14% of the agencies provided transportation for their own participants.

Table 2.
Percent of Agencies Providing Differing Types of Leisure and Recreation
Activities for Special Populations

	Park and Recreation (N=68)	Community Education (N=255)	Public Schools (N=82)
Games and Bowling	86	38	76
Swimming	65	43	61
Entertainment and Events	62	58	01
Arts and Crafts	57	48	02

Respondents were asked to indicate the qualifications of personnel leading recreation programs for handicapped individuals. Of the community education and park and recreation agencies, no specially trained recreation personnel were employed to implement special programs in 69% of the situations, whereas 27% of the agencies employed one or two specially trained personnel. Only 4% of the community education and park and recreation agencies staffed three or more specially trained individuals. Most (87%) of the community respondents indicated that a staff person was not employed full time to implement special recreational programs. Leadership for special programs was most frequently provided by general programming staff in park and recreation agencies (53%) and in community education agencies (40%), and by volunteers (see Table 3). These responses were further supported by level-of-training items indicating that 19% of the agencies employed personnel who have had professional training in the recreation field, while even fewer (7%) employed professionals held

associate, bachelor's or master's level degrees in therapeutic recreation. In school programs, recreation skills were taught more often by adapted physical educators (78%) than by physical education (46%) or special education teachers (23%).

Table 3.
**Percent of Agencies Having Types of Personnel Responsible
for Recreation Services for Special Populations**

	Park and Recreation	Community Education	Public Schools
Full-time Therapeutic Recreation Specialist	15	08	02
General Staff	53	40	44
Physical Education Teachers	—	—	46
Adapted Physical Education Teachers	—	—	78
Volunteers	49	39	—

Integration with Nonhandicapped Individuals

Both surveys included items concerning the integration of handicapped with nonhandicapped individuals in recreation activities. Over half of the public school respondents indicated that handicapped students were taught recreation skills more often in small segregated groups (2-5 or 6-10 members), than in mainstreamed classes (22%). Less than half of the community respondents indicated that games, entertainment, arts and crafts, and swimming were integrated with nonhandicapped groups. Camping, nature, and other activities were integrated even less often; fewer than 10% of respondents indicated integration of these activities.

Trends in Future Services

When asked whether the agencies would provide recreational programming for handicapped individuals if assistance were made available, 188 (58%) of the community respondents indicated that such services would be offered. One hundred forty one (44%) of the community education and park and recreation agencies anticipated future inclusion of special recreation services into their programs. Although 57% of the public school respondents agreed that there was a need for including recreation skills instruction in school curricula, only 34% anticipated such inclusion in future programs.

Respondents to both surveys indicated they would welcome assistance in expanding recreation programs for special populations. Community education and park and recreation respondents especially expressed the desire for financial assistance (64%) and assistance through the acquisition of specially trained staff (50%).

Approximately half of the community education and park and recreation respondents indicated a desire for a training manual for developing new recreation programs.

Discussion

The purpose of this survey was to determine the status of recreation and leisure services to special populations in community (i.e., park and recreation, community education) and school environments throughout the state of Minnesota. In addition to the nature and extent of special recreation services currently offered, the perceived responsibilities and degree of collaboration among community agencies and public schools were also indicated by the data.

This needs assessment study was delimited to park and recreation agencies, community education departments, and public school programs. Other residential agencies potentially serving special populations in the leisure domain, such as developmental achievement centers, group homes, nursing homes, and state institutions were not included as subjects. Additionally, only agencies in the state of Minnesota were included in the survey, and therefore, results could not be generalized to communities and schools in other states. Since the majority (66%) of respondents represented small, rural communities with populations of less than 10,000, results could be

further delimited to communities outside of metropolitan areas.

Results of the current investigation revealed that each agency type believed another agency should be primarily responsible for meeting the recreation needs of the handicapped citizens in the community. A large majority of park and recreation agencies believed that community education programs should be primarily responsible, and an even greater percentage of community education agencies suggested that park and recreation agencies must assume primary leadership for providing leisure services to handicapped citizens in the community. Although the public schools assumed a minor degree of responsibility for special recreation services, a majority of school respondents were unaware of other recreation service providers in the community.

Concerning the quantity and quality of recreation and leisure services provided, programs for handicapped citizens, as revealed in this study, continue to be offered on a limited basis. Similar to the findings in other state-wide needs assessment surveys (Austin, et al., 1977; Edginton, et al., 1975; Lancaster, 1976; Schleien, Porter, & Wehman, 1979), this study reveals that there is a substantial gap between services needed and services provided. In many cases, recreational activities continue to be offered according to instructors' choices and the availability of space, equipment, and time. This study indicated that client preferences were considered only in a minimal number of cases. According to recent research findings (Wehman & Schleien, 1981; Wuerch & Voeltz, 1982), if participants are to acquire, generalize, and maintain recreation skills in several environments, it is necessary that personal preferences and other essential factors (e.g., age appropriateness, ability levels, family support) be considered in program development.

Further analysis in this study revealed that recreation programs were often limited to stereotyped activities for handicapped children such as bowling, swimming, arts and crafts, field trips, and special events. More normalizing types of activities such as camping, nature, music, skiing, and spectator sports were rarely associated with special recreation programs. Integration efforts, characterized by handicapped and non-handicapped individuals participating together in community or school environments, were cited only infrequently. Community and school-based recreation programs in the state of Minnesota continue to be characterized as primarily segregated and limited in nature and scope.

The results of this study revealed that all three types of agencies (park and recreation, community education, and public schools) were providing special recreation services, but on a limited basis. Community education and park and recreation agencies seemed to provide typical recreation services on a limited basis, while schools incorporated recreation skill instruction in adapted physical education classes. While agencies generally agreed that each other and themselves were responsible, results showed services to be barely adequate. Services provided by more than one agency seemed to be more by coincidence than by any deliberate trans-agency plan, and showed an apparent unnecessary duplication of effort.

Concerning the availability and training of program staff to develop and implement special recreation programs, almost nine of every 10 agencies did not employ a full-time professional. Like other surveys in the past, a scarcity of program leaders with training in therapeutic recreation, adapted physical education, or special education was found. The lack of such levels of training were indicated to be a primary barrier to offering special and integrated recreation programs. However, research is currently underway to investigate the amount and type of trained leadership necessary to successfully mainstream severely handicapped learners (Rynders, Johnson, Johnson, & Schmidt, 1980; Schleien, Olson, Rogers, & McLafferty, in press; Schleien, Schermer, Krotee, Heyne, in press). Initial findings reveal high levels of appropriate play on the part of the handicapped participants and increased positive nonhandicapped peer attitudes toward handicapped children, without special staff or additional expenses or modifications. Similarly, Witt (1979) encouraged leaders of community programs to include handicapped persons in their regular program offerings and to involve the entire staff. Inservice training was also recommended to develop the skills and attitudes of the regular staff providing services for handicapped individuals. The absence of trained staff cannot continue to be an acceptable reason for ignoring the recreation and leisure needs of all citizens. Sensitivity and awareness can also be improved by requiring courses in leisure services for special populations for all recreation training programs and adapted

courses for all physical education training programs.

In order to optimally meet the needs of handicapped individuals, the responsibility for improving and expanding recreation services should rest with professionals, educators, and families in park and recreation, community education, and school environments. If responsibilities are spread too widely among agencies, however, it is possible that (a) no one organization will guarantee they are carried out or (b) lack of communication could lead to redundancy or gaps in services. In contrast, a lead agency designated to assume overall programming responsibility, could function to insure that comprehensive recreation services were provided in an efficient and effective manner. This responsibility could be assumed on the basis of the chronological ages of the handicapped persons served or on the basis of resources available in the community. For example, the responsibility for training young people in leisure skills could be assumed by public schools, and by specific community recreation agencies (e.g., public recreation and park departments, community education agencies) for adults. Or responsibility could fall with the agency best equipped in terms of facilities, staff and funds to provide special leisure services. However, the success of dividing responsibilities depends upon the quality of communication among the agencies.

If, for any of a variety of reasons, agencies fail to share the responsibility for providing quality leisure and recreation services for handicapped individuals, one agency should assume leadership. Robb (1979), in discussing the movement of handicapped persons from institutions to community settings, insisted that park and recreation agencies assume responsibility for delivering leisure services. Since it is the public recreation and park department's responsibility to meet the needs of all citizens within the political jurisdiction, it is prudent that this agency group assume a primary leadership role in the trans-agency model of special recreation service delivery. As a leader, park and recreation agencies can bridge the gap between public schools, which provide prerequisite recreation skill instruction, and community education agencies, which provide opportunities to generalize recreation skills in actual community situations. In this vital role, park and recreation departments can provide the practice and experience for handicapped individuals to develop preferences and refine recreational skills.

Transagency models and shared responsibility for recreation programs are natural theoretical approaches to therapeutic recreation. That such models are uncommon in practice is not surprising, given the complex communication and shared resource networks necessary. This study revealed weaknesses in recreation services in one state (Minnesota) and revealed ideal opportunities for future growth. Based on these results, five recommendations for future special recreation program planning were developed: (a) clear networks of communication across agencies must be delineated to reduce duplication and complement resources, (b) activity offerings must be expanded, (c) integration of handicapped individuals into recreation programs with nonhandicapped participants should be encouraged, (d) support should be generated for increasing the number of specially trained personnel across agencies, and (e) access and availability of special recreation programs should be improved.

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