

## **Bringing inclusion into focus: A camp-based research study**

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### **Abstract:**

As an increasing number of Jewish summer camps welcome campers with disabilities, it becomes more important to understand the experience of these campers and that of their neurotypical peers. In this study, campers with disabilities and neurotypical campers participated together in a photography activity. Photographs and their accompanying narratives were analyzed, yielding three categories of results: (1) camp community and responsibility (2) Jewish experience at camp; and (3) challenges and opportunities. Results are discussed in terms of enhancing the experience of inclusion at camp for all campers.

**Keywords:** Jewish camp | inclusion | photography | recreation | qualitative methods

### **Article:**

Increasingly, Jewish summer camps are providing the supports and environmental accommodations needed for campers with disabilities to become part of the camp community. While there is an emerging literature on the topic, research efforts have not kept pace with the growth in camp attendance by individuals with disabilities. In particular, little is known about the how these campers experience their time at camp. The current study explores the perceptions of social inclusion and Jewish engagement of campers with disabilities as conveyed by campers participating in a photography activity.

### **Inclusion at Jewish overnight camps**

The topic of inclusion has taken on greater urgency and is receiving growing attention in both research and practice in Jewish education. Many see this as being long overdue. As an interesting case in point, the *Journal of Jewish Education* has, for the first time, dedicated a special issue to the topic (Volume 83, no. 1). The content of the issue supports the contention that Jewish summer camps are taking the lead in this area, with two of the four articles (Olson, 2017;

Shefter, Uhrman, Tobin, & Kress, 2017) reporting research based in these settings (and a third [Uhrman, 2017] chronicling the challenges parents of students with disabilities have with regard to day schools). Inclusion programs at camps have proliferated and the range of participants served has expanded (Shefter et al., 2017).

At the same time, the field of inclusion in Jewish education has much room to grow. In the title of his introduction to the special issue of the *Journal of Jewish Education*, Pomson notes that the field is “making a start, after 80 years,” alluding to both the progress and its slow pace in advancing research on individuals with disabilities in Jewish education. Research on inclusion—at camps and elsewhere—is scarce and has primarily focused on reports of impact and outcomes (as is the case for Jewish camp research in general); we know less about the actual experience of campers with disabilities while they are in the camp setting. Our goal in this article is to share part of this largely untold story by reporting the findings of a photography-based–data-collection methodology focusing on neuroatypical campers and their neurotypical peers.

### **The language and practice of inclusion**

There is no doubt that the language and terminology associated with disability and inclusion are “contested” (Pomson, 2017, p. 1). The American Psychological Association (*Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*, 2009) and various leaders in the field (e.g., Tobin & Blas, 2015) suggest that *person-first* language is the most appropriate, for example, rejecting “disabled person” in favor of “person with a disability.” Others suggest that person-first language emphasizes disability as a negative element tacked onto one’s life, as opposed to a part of who one is, and prefer use of language that alludes to an integrated identity (autistic person rather than person with autism).

Moreover, the term *disability* has itself been criticized for implying a deficit in the individual, rather than a shortcoming in society’s ability (or willingness) to be open to all (Varenne & McDermott, 1995). The terms neurotypical and neuroatypical have been proposed as descriptive and nonpejorative and are preferred by others in the field. Given the lack of consensus, we will use the terms *campers with disabilities* and *neuroatypical campers* interchangeably. Unless otherwise indicated, we use the term *disability* broadly, and not confined to a particular classification or diagnostic category, as suggested by the definition provided by the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA): “A person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such an impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such an impairment” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009).

*Inclusion* is a term that is used to describe a variety of practices. The term emerged from the ADA’s requirement for individuals to be educated in the “least restrictive environment” possible.<sup>1</sup> Hicks-Monroe (2011) describes the evolution of educational services for individuals with disabilities as a movement from isolation to integration and ultimately to inclusion, with the parallel educational paradigms moving from self-contained classroom to “pull out” approaches (in which students with disabilities spend part of the day in a separate “resource room” or the like) to full inclusion. Hicks-Monroe goes on to point out that there is research that both supports and calls into question the efficacy of full inclusion.<sup>2</sup>

In practice, inclusion can take several forms. Because there is variability in both the level of functioning of neuroatypical individuals and in the affordances of any given setting, “least restrictive” is situationally determined. This area is also “contested” from both a theoretical standpoint (about the degree of responsibility of a setting to accommodate all individuals) and a financial-logistic one (the availability of funds and trained personnel). In fact, some have suggested the idea of a “continuum” of inclusion, both within the camp industry and elsewhere, with participants with and without disabilities provided with varying opportunities to play, socialize, and learn together (Schleien, Miller, Walton, Roth, & Tobin, 2017). The camp industry is currently striving to move along this continuum with a goal of full social inclusion of all campers, where the entire camp is vested in a mission of a culture of inclusion (Miller, Schleien, Walton, & Tobin, In review). Because inclusion manifests in multiple ways; we use this term broadly as well, parallel to how it is used by camp professionals (Shefter et al., 2017) to encompass a variety of practices that bring neuroatypical youth together with neurotypical peers for joint participation in activities.

### **Inclusion and camp**

Though ambiguities around terminology make it difficult to trace the history of summer camps’ efforts to address the needs of campers with disabilities or to make broad generalizations about the field, there is evidence that work in this arena is long-standing. Early efforts, reflecting the predominant approach of the times, took the form of programs exclusively for youth with special needs rather than inclusion programs linked to a general camp program. For example, Gilmore (2016) traces efforts to provide camp experiences for youth with special needs back to the creation of a summer program for youth with physical disabilities. Paris (2008) points to the 1922 opening of Camp Ramapo for “problem” boys (p. 339) as the initial Jewish communal effort to address the needs of campers with special needs. As of 2016, 41% of Jewish overnight camps have some sort of inclusion program, a number that has been steadily increasing (Shefter et al., 2017).

Trends in addressing the needs of neuroatypical campers in Jewish overnight camps have reflected those in general special education, where legislation passed in the 1970s added urgency to inclusion efforts. Programs for neuroatypical campers at the Conservative Movement’s Ramah camps began at this time at camps in New England (1970) and Wisconsin (1973; Blas, 2010). Though less formally documented, efforts at other camps emerged around this time. A second trend—in both general education and Jewish summer camping—has been an increase in the degree of inclusion, or the extent to which neuroatypical and neurotypical campers participate alongside one another in the camp program (participating in activities and sharing a sleeping quarters), as opposed the participation of neuroatypical campers in separate activities with limited joint participation with neurotypical peers (Blas, 2010), though the latter conditions do still exist. With an increasing number of neuroatypical campers aging out of camp programs, there have been efforts to develop vocational programs to service the needs of older teens and young adults (Olson, 2017).

Jewish camps employ a variety of models, or degrees, of inclusion in their program (Shefter et al., 2017). In some programs, neuroatypical campers live in their own quarters and join their

neurotypical peers for parts of the day. Even within this model, the amount of time neuroatypical campers spend with neurotypical peers and the type of activities they do together vary. In other cases, neuroatypical campers live together and spend the day with neurotypical campers, perhaps with a one-on-one aid or an extra counselor in the sleeping quarters. Different models may even coexist within the same camp.

The diversity of models of inclusion is related to that of the populations served by these programs. Camps often take a case-by-case approach, assessing a neuroatypical youth's needs and the potential of the camp to be a place in which the youth can thrive as a camper given the range of feasible accommodations (Shefter et al., 2017). Of course, camps differ in terms of the resources they have available to make the needed accommodations and the motivation or sense of responsibility for doing so.

There is a small but growing body of research findings indicating the potential of inclusive camp experiences to promote a variety of positive physical, emotional, and social outcomes among both those with disability and those without both in the general (Brannan, Arick, Fullerton, & Harris, 2000; Gilmore, 2016; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997; Van Belois & Mitchell, 2009) and Jewish contexts (Kopelowitz, 2013; Schleien, Miller, Walton, & Roth, 2015). In the Jewish context, there are few studies of outcomes of the camp experience for neuroatypical campers themselves; the existing literature points to growth in self-advocacy skills related to explaining the nature of one's disability to neurotypical peers (Schleien et al., 2015). A majority of the parents studied by Kopelowitz (2013) reported that while their neuroatypical children routinely face boundaries with regard to Jewish education, the camp experience provided them access to both Jewish community and ritual. Kieval (2013) found that the number of friendships increased for neuroatypical campers following participation in a camp inclusion program. Improvement in an array of social skills and independence in activities of daily living were also reported (based on camper and parent report).

Positive outcomes have also been documented for neurotypical peers and for staff members. A large majority of those who have served on the staff of inclusion programs at Ramah camps report that their experience with neuroatypical campers has led them to feel more comfortable with individuals with disabilities and be more aware of issues related to disability (Kopelowitz, 2013; Singfer, Kress, & Uhrman, 2018). This finding is mirrored in the reports of neurotypical campers (Blas, 2010; Parker, 1999). Moreover, both staff and neurotypical campers report that the presence of an inclusion program benefits the camp as a whole (Blas, 2010; Schleien et al., 2015; Singfer et al., 2018). As discussed by Shefter et al. (2017),

The communal nature of camp provides opportunities for growth for both neuroatypical and neurotypical youth. The former have opportunities to participate in the workings of the camp community. The latter may be interacting closely for the first time with neuroatypical peers with the potential for positive outcomes. (p. 72)

Of course, inclusion at camp also poses challenges. The respondents to Kopelowitz's (2013) survey express particular concern about enhancing efforts in social inclusion—that is, the degree to which neuroatypical campers are actively engaged with the broader camp community. Staff training and supervision, already difficult in the camp context (Sales & Saxe, 2003), are

additionally complicated with regard to inclusion as staff— many still teens themselves—must develop the skills and attitudes conducive to working with campers with disabilities (Schleien et al., 1997; Shefter et al., 2017).

### **The current study**

This study gives voice to campers as they reflect on their camp experience. While most of the research on Jewish summer camping are either studies of impact, generally using retrospective data and/or methodological and statistical techniques that allow for the “isolation” of the camp experience (e.g., Cohen, 2007; Keysar & Kosmin, 2004) or descriptions of the educational programming at camp, often from an ethnographic perspective (Reimer, 2012; Rothenberg, 2016),<sup>3</sup> the current study focuses on the campers themselves. Specifically, the research explores the reflections of neurotypical and neuroatypical campers on their experiences of inclusion and Jewish connection. Not only does this add to the existing literature by offering the camper perspective while embedded within the camp setting, but it also contributes to the research on individuals with disabilities and the benefits of challenges of inclusion for a diversity of campers at a Jewish summer camp. To accommodate all the needs and abilities of all the camper participants, we used a methodology based on photography and the narrative explanation of photographs.

We were guided by the following question: What do the photographs taken by neuroatypical campers (in conjunction with a neurotypical buddy) and the campers’ descriptions of these photographs tell us about the experiences of social inclusion and Jewish engagement at a Jewish overnight camp?

### **Methods**

This study uses a photography project and accompanying verbal descriptions of the photographs to explore campers’ conceptualization of the camp experience, with a specific focus on social inclusion and Jewish engagement. The methods allow for the examination of both neurotypical and neuroatypical youth working together to encourage socialization while capturing their camp experiences. We pay particular, though not exclusive, attention to the reports of the neuroatypical participants in order to best inform the literature on inclusion at Jewish summer camps.

There is a long history of the use of photography as a modality of qualitative research that can provide a voice to those, such as young children, at risk of being omitted from a conversation due to limited verbal competence (e.g., Langmann & Pick, 2017; Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2010; Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2013). In addition to spurring conversations, when “photos are produced by the participants in the study they become a tool by which qualitative researchers can facilitate the data gathering process to reflect the voices of participants in an authentic way” (Swaminathan & Mulvihill, 2013, p. 3). For example, Keat, Strickland, and Marinak (2009) used photography to help young immigrant children communicate in the classroom, finding that the experience has a positive impact on students’ sense of agency, or perception of their “control and power within the relationship with the teacher” (Keat et al., 2009, p. 19). Photography has also been used as a prompt for research concerning children’s understanding of abstract concepts such as “play” (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Krisell, 2016; Izumi-

Taylor, Ro, Han, & Ito, 2017) and “humor” (Loizou, 2011). While the specifics of their methodologies differ, the researchers cited here have analyzed photographs, often with descriptive narratives provided by the participants, as a way of enriching and diversifying the way in which participants, particularly those with challenges in expressive communication, represent their responses to the researchers’ prompts.

For the current project, researchers from [organization withheld for blind review] worked together with InFocus®, a North Carolina-based inclusion research and advocacy organization that uses photography as a modality through which people of varying abilities can share their experiences of social inclusion. Their approach was adapted to fit within the parameters of the camp environment and schedule.

### Setting and participants

The research took place at Camp Harim,<sup>4</sup> a denominationally affiliated camp in the eastern United States, a camp of approximately 500 campers and 150 staff. Of these 500 campers, 15 are in Chaverim, the camp’s program for children with disabilities. The camp was chosen largely as a site of convenience—the authors had prior relationships with the inclusion coordinator and the camp was close enough for a visit by one of the researchers to cofacilitate a conversation with staff about initial findings of the study. Because the Chaverim program was a relatively new initiative, camp leaders were particularly interested in feedback to shape emerging efforts.

As noted above, there is a range of inclusion models in place at Jewish overnight camps. In the case of Camp Harim, there were multiple models running simultaneously, providing options for those with different needs in terms of a “least restrictive environment.” Some campers are able to function, sometimes with the support of an aid, in the same living quarters as their neurotypical peers. Campers in the Chaverim program, with whom we worked, lived in separate accommodations and joined their neurotypical peers for multiple activities throughout the day. This latter program was only in its second year and is considered by the camp leadership to be the camp’s first formal foray into inclusion (with prior efforts being more episodic and informally developed).

For reasons of confidentiality, we did not inquire about the neurotypical participants’ specific classifications or diagnostic categories. Overall, the campers in the Chaverim program represent a range of categories of disability, with the majority being diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. Though we realize that more specific information would have provided a fuller picture of the group, our goal was to analyze data about the participants in Chaverim in general, not to draw conclusions about a specific diagnostic category. There is evidence to suggest that camp-based inclusion programs are generally open to campers with particular levels of functioning (and degree of assistance needed) with less regard for campers’ diagnostic criteria (Shefter et al., 2017).

### Procedures

The photography activity was introduced as a regular group activity for Chaverim campers and their neurotypical buddies. Of the 15 campers in Chaverim, about half participated in the

photography elective. These campers were chosen by the Chaverim program director, based on those she believed would be most successful in the program. The Chaverim neurotypical buddies were self-selected campers from Chaverim's partner age group. There were a total of seven dyads that participated in the program.

In their work, InFocus® typically makes use of dyads of neurotypical and neuroatypical participants for two reasons. First, the assistance provided by a neurotypical peer widens the range of neuroatypical youth who are able to participate in the activity. Second, the collaborations required by the participants in each dyad are seen as fostering learning about one another and deepening relationships. In the current study, the dyads jointly determined the subject or event to be photographed in response to the prompts provided; the choice cannot be said to represent the individual opinion of either camper in the pair. However, discussion regarding the significance of the photograph allowed for individual input from all participants, allowing the exploration of the associations provided by each member of the dyad.

The activity was cofacilitated by the camp inclusion coordinator and a member of her staff, who were trained by InFocus® personnel prior to the summer. Also prior to the summer, the InFocus® team, researchers from [organization withheld for review], and camp personnel developed the following prompts to be used in the activity:

1. Show something you are really good at doing.
2. Show something about camp that is meaningful or valuable to you.
3. Show something that makes you feel connected to Judaism at camp.
4. If you could do one thing to make camp better for you, show what it would be.

The first prompt was meant as an ice-breaker to help the group get to know one another and become familiar with the process. The second and fourth prompts were meant to elicit descriptions of the campers' positive and challenging experiences while at camp. The third prompt addressed the campers' relation to the camp's Jewish mission, a centerpiece of the camp's activities and goals. The group met approximately once every two to three days over the course of almost two weeks. Buddy pairs met between group meetings to take photographs and were asked to pick several to share and discuss during subsequent group meetings.

The following cycle was used for each of the prompts:

- The activity leaders introduced the prompt at a group meeting.
- The buddy-pairs met during free time periods to take photos based on the prompt and pick three to share with the activity leader.
- The activity leader sent (electronically) the chosen photos to the InFocus® team for analysis.
- The InFocus® team analyzed the photographs (using the method described below) and, prior to the next group meeting, provided feedback and guidance (including additional prompt questions for clarification) to the activity leaders for discussion of the photos.
- At the next activity group, campers discussed the meaning behind their photos. One of the activity leaders took notes (which were shared with the InFocus® team to help them

understand the campers' thinking) while the other facilitated. Then, the next photography assignment was provided, and the cycle began again.

The camp schedule called for each cycle to take place rapidly, generally within three days. Once they had analyzed the photos for each of the prompts, the InFocus® team then looked across the themes for individual prompts to identify overall themes that spanned the various prompts and descriptions. A set of initial candidates for overall themes was communicated to the activity leaders, who then provided a member check by discussing the themes with the campers during a group meeting to confirm their relevance and to suggest modifications as needed. The group feedback was communicated to InFocus® which revised the themes based on this input. Final themes were shared and the campers chose from among their previous photos exemplars for each of the themes.

Prior to beginning the photography program, each participant and his or her parent(s) were asked to sign a consent form that detailed the specifics of the study and the benefits and risks of participation. The consent form and the photography activity and prompts were approved by a university institutional review board (IRB). Only campers with a completed consent form participated in the research project. In addition, following the completion of the program, interviews were conducted with the director of the camp and the inclusion coordinator regarding their experience with the project. Before each, they were similarly required to review and sign an IRB-approved consent form.

#### Data analysis

Two teams of researchers were involved in the study and data analysis. The team from the William Davidson Graduate School of Jewish Education—JTS (henceforth, the Davidson School) was responsible for the initial setup, including choosing a site, contacting the camp and inclusion coordinator, and helping to design the photography activity. The InFocus® team guided the camp through the photography activity, offering regular responses to the photographs, suggesting questions for discussion, and supporting the camp personnel in implementing the program. InFocus®'s analysis occurred during the summer; they were in regular dialogue with the camp administrators throughout the program. The InFocus® team analyzed the dyads' photographs, using a strategy (described below) that explored the themes evident in the photographs.

The Davidson School team, in turn, conducted their analysis once the activity was completed for the summer. Their analyses complemented that of the InFocus® team by incorporating the narratives offered by the campers. Because the narratives, in contrast to the jointly taken photographs, were provided separately by each member of the camper dyads, the Davidson School team was able to analyze the narratives, paying specific attention to the experiences of the neuroatypical campers. The InFocus® team also interviewed the camp director and inclusion coordinator to elicit additional insight from the school team into the process and experiences of the program. Once the two teams' analyses were complete, the Davidson School team reviewed the groups' work and identified consistent themes. These were then sent to InFocus® and the camp professionals for final review and approval. Below explicates the process and collaboration in greater detail.

The InFocus® comprised individuals with experience related to the context of the study. The six analysis team members each had camp experience, as well as experience facilitating the community inclusion of individuals who have a disability. Additionally, the selection process for analysts was deliberate in considering age, gender, varying abilities, and understanding of Judaism and Jewish values, as all of these factors contributed to the interpretation of materials received. InFocus® leaders provided training to the analysis team in photo literacy along with a local museum curator of education and an introduction to visual thinking strategies to establish a common foundation for unraveling themes over the course of the program.

Visual thinking strategies have been increasingly studied as a method for approaching works of art, including photography, in recent years. Success in training various professional groups and students to enhance their observation and critical thinking skills (e.g., visual intelligence) has been well documented (Yenawine, 2014). The InFocus® team adapted the visual thinking strategy for use in the photography analysis by incorporating three research-based questions into the discussion surrounding photographs and narratives: (1) What’s going on (or happening) in this picture? (2) What do you see that makes you say that? (3) What more can you (or we) find?

Analytic methods also drew from design thinking, which evolved as a combination of engineering and art, with more recent acclamation proposed by Burnett and Evans (2016) as a method in which a visual image of ideas may capture prevalence of thought as an approach to designing one’s life. Likewise, this visual mapping has been used to connect thoughts in a design format that enables team members to put themselves in the shoes of the individuals for whom research, a project, or innovation is focused. This technique is referred to as the Design Thinking Empathy Map (Crandall, 2010). This process involves creating a written map of ideas (i.e., what the individual of focus says, thinks, feels, and does) that all connect back to the individual who is drawn in the center of the map.



**Figure 1.** Empathy map for the third prompt.

The InFocus® team created four empathy maps, one for each of the four prompts, that provided a visual representation of campers' conversations and photographs and their interpretation by the analysis team (see sample design map, Figure 1). Key themes from each camper pair were identified, and each dyad's responses were color coded. Checkmarks were used to indicate when ideas were duplicated between camper pairs.

Following this extensive review of photographs and dialogue surrounding each of the four prompts, the InFocus® analysis team utilized the four design maps and printed photos to collectively address the emergence of themes identified across prompts. As the themes were expressed in the work of the dyads, the InFocus® analysis represents the work of both neuroatypical and neurotypical youth.

To glean information about the perspectives of the *neuroatypical* campers, a second round of analysis, conducted by the Davidson School team, focused on the notes from the narrative descriptions provided by the campers (each member of the dyad was asked to provide his or her own explanation of the photographs). An open-coding approach was applied to these notes (Miles & Huberman, 1994), drawing out recurring themes with a focus on the neuroatypical campers' experiences of inclusion and Judaism at the camp. As such, the findings emerged from the joint activity of the dyads and from those based on the comments of the neuroatypical campers.

## Findings

The InFocus® team, analyzing dyads' data across the empathy maps of the four photography prompts, identified five themes (discussed below). The Davidson School team's subsequent analysis, using open coding, of the neuroatypical campers' narratives led to the identification of three overall categories that proved useful for organizing *both* the five themes from the dyads *and* the core themes from the narratives of the neuroatypical campers. These three categories were sent to the InFocus® team and the camp professionals for final review and approval. These three categories are: (1) camp community and responsibility (2) Jewish experience at camp; and (3) challenges and opportunities. We use these three themes to organize the findings, while indicating, when applicable, the source of the data (photographs from the dyad and/or narratives from the neurotypical and/or neuroatypical campers).

### Camp community and responsibility

Three of the themes identified through the InFocus® team's visually based design thinking analysis related to the idea of community at camp and the shared responsibility of maintaining it. The analysis team encapsulated these themes as (1) Camp culture supports a diverse and welcoming community; (2) "It is not your duty to complete the work, but neither are you free to desist from it" (*Lo alecha ham'lacha ligmor, v'lo atah ben chorin l'hibatel mimena*; Pirke Avot 2:21) as applied to creating camp community; and (3) Social inclusion is enjoyed and desired.

For both the neurotypical and neuroatypical campers, comments such as, "I am part of a community" at camp, "It is very much a community," and I enjoy "being part of a community" at camp recurred in camper narratives. Photographs depicting campers participating in activities

together and with staff, and comments regarding the support campers felt at camp, clearly suggest a *diverse, inclusive, and welcoming community*. This was represented in multiple photos of smiling youth arm in arm with one another and with staff members. One pair shared a photo of a wrist laden with “friendship bracelets.” A telling quotation—“My friends help me walk back to my bunk at night when I can’t see and they use my FM system to help me hear”—points to a strong sense of community and *communal responsibility* in which friends working together allow a camper to overcome environmental challenges.

Throughout their photographs and narratives, campers described a strong sense of connection to their peers and the camp as a whole; these relationships, while powerful in and of themselves, were also understood as meaningful and authentic expressions of their Jewish identities. Campers saw community as a core Jewish value, and they were acutely aware of the uniqueness of camp in this regard. For example, one neurotypical camper, commenting on a picture of a prayer space, notes that “I like having this place with my friends to pray. My [group] and counselors are connected with praying here and so is my teacher.”

Particularly significant in their discussions was their focus on social inclusion at camp. Campers remarked on how welcome they felt at camp—by *all* campers and staff, regardless of ability—and on their responsibility in creating an inclusive community. “Treating people nicely” was seen as a foundational Jewish value, central to the camp’s mission. It was not viewed as a burden but rather appeared to come naturally, despite the fact that they did not have specific training or orientation to individuals who carry diagnostic labels. “When you live with people,” one neurotypical camper explained, “you learn you don’t have time off from them, and you realize how you would want to be treated, so it shows me how to treat other people. A great community of ‘paying it forward’ because we are constantly seeing people do good for others so it makes me want to continue that and do good for others.”

When asked for specific examples of including others, the campers readily replied with accommodations and strategies. For example, one of the neuroatypical campers noted, “I help my counselors when I hold Eva’s hand sometimes.” In this small gesture, this camper understood her role in helping everyone feel welcome and supported in an inclusive camp community. Though the differences in verbal acuity are evident, the sense of shared responsibility was expressed by both neurotypical campers and neuroatypical campers.

For the campers with disabilities, in addition to instilling a palpable sense of belonging, the theme of camp community was also connected with the significance of relationships with neurotypical peers and staff. They described meaningful connections with peers and staff of *all* abilities, relationships they especially value because they feel that they are treated as “equals” and can do “normal” things together. Inclusion programs carry a risk of putting individuals with disabilities in a passive role as recipients of needed help, providing negative messaging about disability as deficit. Our results, however, indicate that this was not the neuroatypical campers’ experience. Rather, they seemed to appreciate that they had something unique to offer in these relationships, noting the many times they were able to help and teach others. There were several examples of this sort of reciprocity in the campers’ dialogues, and it appeared to serve as the foundation for true friendship between campers of varying abilities. When describing a photograph, one camper with a disability explained, “I chose this title because

it is bunk 12 and represents the 12 tribes of Israel. It connects to Judaism because it has the 12 tribes and it has a Jewish star on it. It also looks like the Israeli flag.” This camper’s neurotypical partner remarked, “I saw the 12 represents that it is bunk 12, but had no connection from that to Judaism until Rachel explained it to me.” Even in this brief interaction, the camper with a disability was validated in what they could contribute to their neurotypical peer. Not only does inclusiveness seem to be a priority for camp and campers, but as this finding reveals, there is also a value and benefit to providing campers of varying abilities opportunities to demonstrate their own efficacy.

### Jewish experience at camp

Jewish themes emerged in response to several of photography prompts. The InFocus® team’s fourth theme relates to the idea that *campers connect to Judaism through experiential and individualized approaches*. This theme surfaces most strongly, however, in the campers’ reflections on the third prompt, asking the buddies to explore a Jewish connection at camp. Interestingly, for this question, *every* dyad’s photographs and narratives centered around *tefillah*, (prayer) and five out of the seven dyads included a photograph and discussion of the same location and activity: the weekly Friday night service in which the entire community gathers together to pray in the outdoor prayer space by the lake.

Friday nights were described as significant for both neurotypical and neuroatypical campers for several reasons. This was one of the few occasions, outside of meal times, that the entire camp community joined together. As explained above, the campers deeply valued the communal experience, and these camp-wide gatherings were, then, especially meaningful. As one neuroatypical camper shared, on Friday evening “I feel connected, because I am with all my friends ... It feels good to share this with the rest of camp. All of camp is connected to Judaism in this picture.” These sentiments were echoed in nearly all the dyads’ narrative reflections. While on a typical day campers were generally with their bunkmates and other grade-level peers, on Friday nights they were with their friends from across the camp community, offering opportunities to see friends of different ages, counselors from other groups and previous years, the entire specialty camp staff, and the camp administration.

It was not simply the coming together that made these nights distinct. Rather, gathering to pray the Kabbalat Shabbat service that ushers in the Sabbath was particularly significant for campers. For many of the pairs, praying together served to strengthen their Jewish connections. “All of camp is connected to Judaism,” one neurotypical camper noted and, again, this was similarly expressed in others’ responses. In this context, prayer took on greater significance; campers engaged in an authentically Jewish endeavor that served to reinforce their strong communal bonds and the Jewish value of “being nice” and including others. This convergence of Jewish experiences and values was deeply powerful for campers, and they found great inspiration in these moments.

Adding to the majesty of the Friday night service was the location. The prayer space is an open, outdoor arena located on the edge of a large lake. It is a picturesque scene and campers repeatedly remarked on its “beautiful view.” The unique opportunity to come together as a community and pray in nature made the experience all the more special.

A recurring theme in the camper narratives was the uniqueness of the Jewish experiences they have at camp and the difficulty of replicating them elsewhere. This was strongly stated in the comments of neurotypical campers, who make comments—for example, noting that the Jewish experience at camp is “something you don’t really find anywhere else” or explaining that “at camp I feel connected to God, but at home, I don’t.”. This theme was also expressed by neuroatypical campers as well, often focusing on the specific elements of the camp prayer services not found at home (e.g., “I like to pray here because it is more fun than my synagogue at home ... because we sing more songs.”) The intense, immersive Jewish connections they describe at camp are a unique phenomenon it seems, separate from the less favorable descriptions of their Jewish lives during the year and in their home synagogues.

In addition to the communal Friday night prayer services, the neuroatypical campers noted an additional factor that makes prayer at camp so meaningful. Camp offers opportunities for campers to connect to the prayers in a way that is both personal and fun. Through experiential, individualized approaches that support campers’ needs, campers were able to connect to the ritual in new and unexpected ways. One camper described the tallit, the prayer shawl, he made at camp and how special it feels to wear something of his own creation. Another remarked on the dancing and singing that is incorporated into the service. Yet another described the special siddur (prayer book) the group uses. Referring to the use of a tune from Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* as the tune to one of the prayers, this neuroatypical camper claims that “This siddur lets you connect more because it relates to things that interest you in everyday life outside of praying.” Exciting and enriching, campers’ experience with prayer was unlike any that they had had previously.

### Challenges and opportunities

The third category has to do with the balance of stasis (or, perhaps, camp tradition) and change. The final dyad theme indicates acknowledgment of the importance of both. Overall, the dyads appreciate the familiar circumstances and the comfort found when associating with familiar people. Sometimes there was mention of relationships that spanned multiple summers. However, there were also comments related to personal growth occurring through being with campers and staff who are different.

In addition to the many positive and encouraging reflections by the dyads, neuroatypical campers shared some notable areas for growth in terms of inclusion. First, all the campers with disabilities described issues of access, times in which they felt that the physical camp environment made it difficult for them to fully participate in the camp programming. A few campers described places at camp where the terrain was rocky and uneven, making it difficult for them to walk safely and comfortably. Walking at night seemed to be a particular issue for some. In sharing her concern, one camper noted, “I might be the only one that needs that much light” when walking around camp in the dark. Not only is this camper self-aware of access issues and the challenges posed at camp, but she also seems to think that change is unlikely, that making this accommodation requires greater support and strength in numbers. In addition to smoother paths and better lighting, other concerns included the noise level in the dining hall and the number of steps to get into and out of camp buildings.

Second, some of the campers with disabilities noted a desire for greater social inclusion. One camper shared an interest in inclusion in a particular camp activity, “I play basketball a lot. I like being on a team with other people, but I am not on a team at camp.” Another noted her a desire to spend more time with her neurotypical peers and buddy. While she acknowledged the limitations of doing so—“I get very tired and can’t stay up as late as they can and sometimes they don’t have enough counselors to keep me safe”—the desire for greater social inclusion persists here. Similarly, a different camper expressed her desire to stay at camp longer. The neurotypical campers are generally at camp for the entire summer, while the campers with disabilities’ sessions last either two weeks or four weeks. With regard to access and social inclusion, the campers describe clear and concrete challenges and express their hope that changes can be made to better address these issues.

## **Discussion**

Overall, our findings provide support for the trend of providing opportunities for interaction between neurotypical and neuroatypical campers. Participants value learning from one another and acknowledge the sense of responsibility for creating a welcoming, inclusive community. Not surprisingly, social relationships took a central role in the experience of these campers. At the same time, these relationships were related to elements of a more educational/programmatic nature, such as prayer.

While the camp context provides opportunity for social interaction and communal responsibility, findings also point to the challenges of these often “rustic” settings. Neuroatypical campers communicated specific impediments to feeling fully comfortable in the camp environment. For example, issues regarding darkness and lighting emerged at several points. These issues may have particular relevance to individuals with disabilities who may find it difficult to navigate unfamiliar (and often uneven) terrain with inadequate lighting. At the same time, the issue is also relevant to the quality of the camp experience of neurotypical campers. For example, while Winland-Brown (1987) found that fear of the dark did not rank high among the fears of first-time campers (though camp personnel should note that 15% of respondents did respond that they were “very” or “a little” afraid of the dark), those who used a nightlight at home had, overall, more fears than those who did not. This is but one instance in which accommodations, while motivated by the needs of neuroatypical campers, might have unintended benefits for neurotypical campers.

Jewish connections seem to be made most strongly with particular spaces and moments within camp, most often connected to prayer experiences in some way. The outdoors and the gathering of the entire camp community seem to be prime contributors to the prayer experience. Participants also contrast the prayer experience at camp with that of their home settings. This is something that is often observed and reported anecdotally by those who work in camp—for example, a well-trod story of the camper who wonders how one can do Havdalah at home in the absence of a lake. There is, however, the potential for the negative comparison of synagogue to camp prayer experiences to be compounded with neuroatypical campers. As the director of Camp Harim put it while reflecting on our findings, “They’re probably also articulating it from a special needs perspective saying, ‘There aren’t enough of these kinds of [inclusion] programs in our synagogues right now, or there isn’t that feel of being welcomed in the synagogues.’”

While the focus on and positive appraisal of prayer at camp is laudable and consistent with the goals of many Jewish camps, it also raises questions about the Jewish educational elements of camp for both neurotypical and neuroatypical campers. Proponents of camp often discuss the potential of communal living to promote an understanding that Judaism permeates all elements of one's experience (not only ritual "Jewish moments"). Sports and other activities are seen as opportunities not only to promote positive interactions in a general sense but also to show the applicability of Jewish values in a range of contexts (e.g., Fox & Novak, 1997). Though there is some evidence that the respondents recognize the distributed nature of Jewish education at camp, the overwhelming focus on ritual moments raises the question about whether campers are making the desired connections between the social and emotional dimensions of daily living and Jewish value concepts. It is also worth noting that the comments did include a few scattered negative appraisals (e.g., "It is boring.").

### Limitations

The most obvious limitation of this study is its small sample size, limiting the overall generalizability of the findings. At the same time, though the study is limited to one camp, the sample represents half of all Chaverim campers, providing strong applicability of neuroatypical participant reports, at least within this camp.

Ecological-contextual factors are relevant to any research methodology; many researchers in education and psychology suggest that studies conducted in applied, or real-world, settings speak more directly to the experience of the participants (Dalton, Elias, & Wandersman, 2007). However, the camp setting poses challenges to creating naturalistic research contexts for methods that require participants to step out of their daily routine.<sup>5</sup> Epstein, Stevens, McKeever, and Baruchel (2006), for example, discuss the experience of needing to alter their methods when a camp director declined to have campers taken out of their routine; the director seemed especially concerned because the participants in question were campers with disabilities (in this case, primarily medical/physical) who, the director felt, were already frequently involved in testing and research.

In this study, our goal was to structure the method in a way that parallels camp activities in general—incorporating an activity and group sharing facilitated by staff. This format can be seen as an "intervention" as well as a "research method." That is, using photography as a tool for conversation and conveyance of important feedback called on campers to reflect on elements of their experience, and such reflection has the potential to shape one's perception; participation in the research may in and of itself shape one's relationship with the topic of the research. This is a potential drawback worth noting, one that is characteristic of all but the most "hands off" observational research.

### Implications and applications

Even given these limitations, a photography-based methodology is a potential boon to the goals of education at camp in that it calls for, in a way that fits naturally within the scope of camp experiences, the sort of reflection seen as central to the efficacy of experiential education (e.g.,

Reimer, 2003). And, in providing an engaging alternate modality of communication, the method has the potential to address the need to “hear the voices of neuro-atypical learners in Jewish educational settings” Pomson (2017, p. 3).

We recognize the challenges of implementing our methodology on a larger scale. Though overall scheduling at camp occurs well in advance of the arrival of the campers, once the session begins there are often shifts and last-minute changes. The fast-paced interchange between camp and the InFocus® team required personnel from both organizations to work feverishly to keep the program on track. And, while camps are no longer luddite-laden outposts devoid of technology, electronic communication is often hampered by poor Internet access.

We also see the potential of photo-documentation to augment the professional training provided to camp staff. Bunk counselors, the staff members with the most direct and sustained contact with campers, are in most cases themselves late adolescents with direct supervisors—division heads and such—who are emerging adults. In general, camp staff members try to balance their responsibilities to their campers with their own needs for social interaction and to “let loose” over summer vacation. They are on duty with few breaks day and night, with little time for training or supervision; even the most motivated staff members are likely to attend any staff development meetings in a tired, distracted state. Staff “week”—the few days staff spend at camp before the arrival of the campers—becomes the primary venue for training. Staff-week training offerings are often content heavy, rushed, and decontextualized—that is, staff, particularly those new to camp and arguably in most need of training, are trying to learn about situations they have yet to encounter). Ideally, staff training should be an ongoing activity, with opportunities for staff to learn from their experiences throughout the summer (Schirick, 2001).

Efforts in staff development with regard to campers with disabilities face these and other challenges. There may be concerns and attitudes about disability that need to be addressed. Staff members may need to learn about particular categories of disability and, importantly, strategies to help foster participation and social inclusion. Those most suited to provide this training throughout the summer—camp inclusion coordinators—are often busy managing crises. Shefter et al. (2017) identified a pernicious cycle in which staff unpreparedness creates situations that consume the time and efforts of the inclusion coordinator, thereby decreasing the capacity of these professionals to provide training and support that might prevent such situations.

While we do not pretend that this photography-and-group-dialogue process holds the solution to the conundrum of staff development at camp, we do recommend the development of ways in which staff can better come to understand the campers’ experiences and how the actions as staff members can serve to enhance the experience or detract from it. This will need to be done in a way that is engaging and motivating. We believe that the use of photographs and related discussion hold potential regarding this end. As one of the staff members put it, linking staff development and camper empowerment through photographs and the conversations that ensue can become a “jumping off point ... for talking about how [neuroatypical] campers have voice and opinions and are more capable than we may give them credit [for].”

## **Conclusion**

Our work demonstrates the potential for methods rooted in photography and group discussion to be used to understand the camper experience. We have focused on the intersection of inclusion and Jewish engagement. Our small sample size means that the study should be used to raise questions for future consideration and research by camp professionals and academics. Beyond this, we recommend the continued, and expanded, use of photography and other modes of self-expression as methodologies that (a) reduce reliance on participants' verbal acuity and (b) integrate more organically into the ecology of the camp setting. Not only does the latter provide a more naturalistic setting for research, but it also minimizes disruptions to the campers' routine and, importantly, avoids the potential of neuroatypical campers to be seen as objects of research. Research can also focus on the impact of paired activities on *neurotypical* campers. In fact, one of the camp leaders focused on this theme in providing feedback about our work, wondering if such structured one-on-one interaction provides an "experience for a typical camper [that is] deeper in its impact than" the more diffuse experience of going "to a Jewish summer camp where there were campers with special needs."

Importantly, the study also highlights the benefits of inclusion for neurotypical and neuroatypical campers. The campers seemed to enjoy and learn valuable lessons, and it would be instructive to consider the ways in which this camp and others might continue to expand work in this area moving forward. It would also be worthwhile to reflect on the Jewish educational opportunity this presents. While the campers shared positive reflections of their inclusion experiences, the "Jewish piece" was notably absent from their responses. An exploration of how the camp may offer a Jewish context and vision may yield some interesting and possibly unanticipated educational outcomes.

To that end, the research also offers opportunities to consider campers' Jewish experiences and camps' Jewish educational mission. The findings suggest that campers have some meaningful Jewish experiences at camp—namely relating to community, nature and prayer. Further conversations about how to build on these bright spots and address challenges would be fruitful.

Finally, we see the potential of initiatives like this—whether they incorporate formal research or are for feedback by practitioners or a combination of both—to amplify the often-muted voices of youth with disabilities and provide opportunities for them to exercise agency in shaping their environment. Kleinert, Harrison, Fisher, and Kleinert (2010) point out that communication skills, including the ability to communicate how others may assist them, are foundational to effective self-advocacy for those with disabilities. Though it may seem paradoxical, professionals working with youth with disabilities must seek innovative ways to scaffold self-expression of needs (and it is notable that Kleinart et al. include the use of photographs as aids to self-expression) at the same time setting up conditions that minimize the help needed (Pledger, 2003).

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Notes**

1. We acknowledge that the term *inclusion* is increasingly being used to refer to efforts to create a community that is diverse relative to a number dimensions, including gender

identity, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and socioeconomic structure, and not only to disability status.

2. The reader is referred to this article for more about the debate around the relative merits of inclusion in schools, which is beyond the scope of this article. Baglieri, Valle, Connor, and Gallagher (2011) also provide a concise yet detailed summary of the controversies concerning the terms *disability* and *inclusion*.

3. Some studies contain subcomponents of both of these categories (e.g., Sales, Samuel, & Boxer, 2011; Sales & Saxe, 2003).

4. A pseudonym.

5. We recognize that the rich environment at camp provides interesting fodder for ethnographies, and researchers have conducted numerous ethnographic studies with great success, as mentioned in the introduction section.

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