

Sports Empowerment Program:  
Coordinating an Inclusive Softball Day-camp at UNCP

Senior Project

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By

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## Abstract

This project description describes the rationale for the coordination of the Sports Empowerment Program, an inclusive softball day camp. It will examine why inclusive practices in athletic settings are beneficial to both individuals with and without a disability. This project description specifically looks at 1) how inclusive athletic settings can change the way individuals without a disability view others with a disability; and 2) how inclusive athletic settings can positively affect the confidence levels of an individual with a disability. Lastly, this project description will discuss how an inclusive sports day camp can be coordinated on a college or university campus.

*Keywords:* Inclusive setting, athletics, confidence, acceptance

## Sports Empowerment Program: Coordinating an Inclusive Softball Day Camp at UNCP

I chose to conduct a Service-Learning Project for my Maynor Honors College project. For my project, I served as the student coordinator for UNC Pembroke's Sports Empowerment Program, an inclusive sports day camp that brings students from local high schools' Exceptional Children programs on to UNC Pembroke's campus to learn and play softball. The goal of this program is to promote inclusion through physical activity.

### Literature Review

In education, inclusion is the practice of educating students with disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers (Papaioannou & Evaggelinou, 2014). But is this the only time that children with disabilities should be able to interact with their non-disabled peers? The answer to this question is 'no'. Inclusive settings are not strictly in the classroom, and no matter where inclusion is being practiced, it is having a positive effect on both individuals with and without a disability. As proved by the court case *Brown v. The Board of Education (1954)*, separate is not equal (Brown v. The Board of Education, 1954). Individuals who are excluded based on their ability level oftentimes miss out on opportunities that others without a disability have.

Unfortunately, there are a lot of negative stigmas surrounding individuals with disabilities. It is because of these stigmas that inclusive programs like The Sports Empowerment Program are as important as they are, because they allow for people to see that that these negative stigmas surrounding individuals with disabilities are simply untrue (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan, & Menke, 2013). Often times, people overlook the

positive effects that inclusive settings, other than the classroom, have to offer.

Specifically, people tend to overlook the positive effects that can be associated with inclusive athletic events.

One of the most important outcomes of inclusive athletic events is that participants who do not have a disability are able to see that individuals with disabilities are able to participate in athletics (Black, Costello, Craft, and Katene, 2015). After seeing that an individual with a disability can successfully participate in athletics, just like they can, individuals without a disability are able to realize that just because someone has abilities that differ from their own does not mean that they are unable to accomplish what they can. This allows people to look past someone's ability level and see them for the person they are.

In their article, Papaioannou and Evaggelinou (2014) looked at how inclusive summer camps, specifically athletic events that occurred at the camp, influenced children without a disability's thoughts and perceptions of other children with a disability. The authors reported that children without a disability who attended the disability camp program had more positive attitudes towards children with disabilities (Papaioannou & Evaggelinou, 2014). Thus, after participating in inclusive athletic events, children without a disability were more accepting of the differences that existed between them and the campers with a disability.

Individuals with disabilities gain the most from inclusive athletic environments. When individuals with a disability are given the opportunity to participate in an inclusive environment, they have higher self-efficacy ratings (Reed, Kennett, Lewis, & Lund-Lucas, 2011). This means that they feel more confident in

their abilities to succeed at certain tasks, and overall feel that they have a higher chance to successfully complete a task. If individuals with disabilities are given the opportunity to participate in inclusive athletic events alongside their peers without a disability, they will feel more confident in their ability to complete other tasks in their day-to-day life.

It is clear that inclusive sports settings are beneficial to both individuals with and without disabilities. However most children with disabilities are not given the opportunity to participate in inclusive athletic events. A North American study found that 37% of children and youth with disabilities never took part in organized physical activities in the community, as compared to only 10% among their typically developing peers (Anaby et al., 2013). The Sports Empowerment Program aims to challenge this statistic so that individuals of all ability levels can benefit from inclusive athletic settings.

### **Coordinating the Event**

The Sports Empowerment Program is an annual inclusive sports day camp held at UNCP and is the result of a huge collaboration between UNCP's Office of Community and Civic Engagement (CCE), Accessibility Resource Center, Office of Campus Recreation, Music Department and Special Education program. The theme for this year's camp was softball, and was held on March 29th. For this year's event I served the student coordinator.

As one of the student coordinators for the event there were multiple tasks along the way that I had to complete in order to ensure that the project was successful. One of the first steps that took place was emailing or calling the different

offices on campus previously involved with the event to ensure that they were still interested in participating with the program. The different offices contacted were UNCP's Office of Community and Civic Engagement, Accessibility Resource Center, Office of Campus Recreation, Music Department and Special Education program.

After contacting these different offices and establishing that they were still interested in helping with the event, we contacted the local high schools who would be invited to participate in this year's event. Normally schools sign up for the event at the Very Special Arts festival held on campus during the fall semester, however this year the festival was cancelled due to Hurricane Matthew. With the VSA festival being cancelled, I contacted the two high schools that participated in last year's Sports Empowerment Program; Lumberton High School and Purnell Swett High School. Each school's lead EC teacher was asked them if they would like to participate again. Both schools accepted the invitation. Each school was then sent a packet of paperwork that would need to be filled out by each one of their students who came to the event in order for them to be eligible to participate. Information such as: permission to be photographed, permission to leave school, pre-existing medical conditions, and a liability form had to be completed by each child's parent or guardian and brought by the teacher to the event. In addition, both schools agreed to provide their own transportation and lunches.

After establishing contact with the two schools that were participating, I finalized a schedule for the day of the event. The schedule for the event was as follows:

- 8:00 First shift volunteers arrive and sign in
- 9:00 Students arrive, will be given groups on bus, disperse onto field

- 9:30 Welcome, National Anthem, Stretches
- 9:45 Divide up into small groups, brief introductions within groups
- 10:00 Skill Station 1
- 10:15 Skill Station 2
- 10:30 Skill Station 3
- 10:45 Skill Station 4
- 11:15 Lunch Break, first shift volunteers leave while second shift volunteers arrive and sign in, change layout of field from stations into two fields
- 11:45 Possible Entertainment
- 12:00 First pitch/start of games
- 12:30 Games end, medals handed out and participants will run through the tunnel
- 1:00 Participants depart

After devising this schedule I contacted the CCE and worked with them to reserve the necessary equipment for the event. This included reserving softball equipment (wiffle balls, bats, and bases), tables and tents for participants to eat lunch at, and the PA system used for announcements and music at the event. Within this step I contacted a total of three campus offices.

The last thing that needed to be done was recruiting UNCP student volunteers to help with the event. The CCE assisted in completing this task. They set up a link to sign up to serve at the event on UNCP Serve and set up a table to sign up student volunteers in The University Center. The call for volunteers was also made within the School of Education's Spring Semester Major's Meetings, the Student Chapter of Exceptional Children, and various School of Education faculty who emailed and/or announced the volunteer opportunity to their classes. It was through these collaborative efforts that we were able to get enough student volunteers to come out and help at the event.

Student volunteers were asked to help in numerous ways at the camp. Some volunteers served as skill station leaders, meaning that they facilitated different stations that participants practiced different softball skills. The skills included were: hitting,

fielding, base-running, throwing and catching. Student volunteers were also asked to serve as group leaders during the event, meaning that they were responsible for helping a particular group of students between the different skill stations and make sure everyone was where they were needed to be. Other student volunteers assisted either the skill station leaders or group leaders as they were needed. Two days prior to the event, I held a training session for student volunteers going over person-first language that they should use during the event, and I also walked them through their responsibilities for the event.

After completing all of these tasks everything was in place for the event itself. My main responsibilities during the event were to instruct student volunteers on where to go, and making sure that everything stayed on schedule. When the participants arrived I helped to assign them up into random groups. I then had the group leaders take their groups to the middle of the field to circle up to begin stretching. After this I had the group leaders take their group over to the first skill station, and from there, they rotated to a new skill station every twenty minutes. It was announced over the PA system when it was time for groups to rotate to a new skill station. After all of the groups completed all four of the skill stations. Then there was a forty minute lunch break, during which I worked with a group of UNCP volunteers to get the field set up so that two games could be played. After lunch the groups formed four teams so that two large softball games could take place. Prior to the game starting Jack Slavin, a representative from the UNCP Athletic Department, threw out the first pitch to symbolize the games had begun. After the first pitch was thrown, the four teams split up among the two fields and played a game of softball. It was ensured that each student had a chance to hit and run the bases multiple times. Group leaders and skill station leaders assisted the students by pushing

wheelchairs, helping students swing the bat or catch the ball. After forty five minutes, the games ended and the awards ceremony began. Each student's name was announced and he or she was provided with a medal. The skill station and group leaders as well as various faculty volunteers formed a tunnel, using their upraised hands, in which each student participant ran through. After this occurred, the students and their teachers departed back to their respective schools.

### **Reflection**

Coordinating The Sports Empowerment Program had a huge impact on me, and I was able to learn a lot from the experience. During the event I was able to see firsthand how beneficial inclusive athletic settings can be for both individuals with and without a disability. As I completed this project I also learned about the value of collaboration, and just how important it is. This project was the end result of a large collaboration between many different offices here on campus, and without this collaboration this project would not have been possible. This knowledge will help me out in my future career, as I will know how important collaboration can be when trying to complete a project. Overall I feel that this project has furthered my education, and has me thinking about different ways that I can incorporate an inclusive sports program at the future school I will teach .

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