

Friendship in Inclusive Physical Education

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Social interaction and development of friendships between children with and without a disability are often proposed as potential outcomes of inclusive education. Physical activity specialists assert that exercise and sport environments may be conducive to social and friendship outcomes. This study investigated friendship in inclusive physical education from the perspective of students with ($n = 8$) and without ($n = 8$) physical disabilities. All participants attended a reversely integrated school and were interviewed using a semistructured, open-ended format. An adapted version of Weiss, Smith, and Theeboom's (1996) interview guide exploring perceptions of peer relationships in the sport domain was used. Four conceptual categories emerged from the analysis: development of friendship, best friend, preferred physical activities and outcomes, and dealing with disability. The results demonstrated the key characteristics of best friends and the influential role they play.

Inclusive educational settings purport to have attitudinal, social, educational, and behavioral benefits (Sherrill, Heikinaro-Johansson, & Slininger, 1994; Stainback, Stainback, & Jackson, 1992). The extent and nature of social interactions among students with and without disabilities have been investigated in physical education. Both positive and negative social experiences have been described. Blinde and McCallister (1998) reported that some students with a disability felt unwelcome in physical education while Goodwin and Watkinson (2000) described supportive and positive interactions with classmates on some occasions, as well as social isolation at other times. Hodge and colleagues found that students with a disability were often socially isolated (Place & Hodge, 2001), but when infrequent social interactions with classmates occurred, they were usually pleasant, friendly, and respectful (Butler & Hodge, 2004). Friendship is a dimension of social interaction and a goal of inclusion (Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1994), but it has been largely ignored in adapted physical education and sport and exercise psychology (Smith, 2003). In a study of inclusion and empowerment, Hutzler, Fliess, Chacham, and Van den Auweele (2002) described friends among the supporting factors of inclusion, but the nature and extent of the friendship was not described.

Developing and maintaining close intimate friendships satisfies the universal need for interpersonal relationships (Weiss, 1974). Friendships are found in virtu-