

# Support Staff as an Essential Component of Inclusive Recreation Services

Kimberly D. Miller, M.S., CPRP

Stuart J. Schleien, Ph.D., LRT/CPRP

Felicia Bowens

## Abstract

The lack of direct support to participants with disabilities in inclusive recreation has been identified as a primary barrier. Recent findings from a search for best practices in inclusive service delivery (ISD) across the U.S. indicated the use of "inclusion support staff" as a prevalent practice to address this need. Data gathered from inclusion facilitators and administrators from 15 public recreation agencies identified as successful with ISD yielded significant detail regarding the use of this staffing practice. Inclusion support staff were essential in assisting participants with disabilities in regard to acquisition of leisure and social skills; participating fully with adaptations, physical assistance and prompting, and successful social interactions with peers. Highly evident was the critical role of the inclusion facilitator in oversight of support staff, including their hiring, preparation, and supervision. Recommendations for future practices and research initiatives are presented to promote more effective and sustainable ISD.

*KEYWORDS: Accommodation, best practices, inclusion support staff, inclusive recreation*

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Author Bios: Kimberly D. Miller is a Research Associate and TRAIN (Therapeutic Recreation And Inclusive Networks) Project Coordinator and Dr. Stuart J. Schleien is a Professor and TRAIN Project Director in the Department of Recreation, Tourism, and Hospitality Management at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Felicia Bowens is a master's student in Therapeutic Recreation at UNCG and is a graduate trainee on TRAIN. All correspondence for this article should be directed toward Ms. Miller at [kdmiller@uncg.edu](mailto:kdmiller@uncg.edu) or 336-334-4480.

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American archeologist Howard Winters described civilization as “the process in which one gradually increases the number of people included in the term ‘we’ or ‘us,’ and at the same time, decreases those labeled ‘you’ or ‘them’ until that category has no one left in it” (Cantwell, 1994). This dichotomy has readily appeared in the field of recreation in the form of “specialized” recreation for “them.” Inclusive recreation represents a step toward viewing individuals with and without disabilities in an equal manner and eliminating the number of people perceived as “they.” For this to become a reality, inclusive service delivery (ISD) must be perceived as more than a best practice; it must become standard practice. Inclusive service delivery is a recreation service model premised on the philosophy that all programs and services should be available to all individuals equally, regardless of background or ability. The primary outcome of ISD is social inclusion as participants with and without disabilities participate successfully, with or without supports, alongside peers in preferred activities and locations.

Recreation providers have identified the lack of direct staff support as a primary barrier impeding ISD (Anderson & Heyne, 2000; Devine & Kotowski, 1999; Devine & McGovern, 2001; Germ & Schleien, 1997; Jones, 2003/2004; Schleien, Germ, & McAvoy, 1996; Scholl, Smith, & Davison, 2005). Providers described staff as inadequately prepared to accommodate participants with disabilities. This is further complicated by the strain placed on program staff when participants with disabilities require supports beyond those typically provided to other program participants. If ISD is to become standard practice in community recreation these primary barriers must be addressed. A recent search for best practices in ISD across the U.S. revealed a wealth of information on how agencies experienc-

ing success with ISD were addressing these participant support needs. This article provides a descriptive analysis of the use of “inclusion support staff” to meet the direct support needs of participants with disabilities in agencies experiencing success with ISD.

## Background

A number of practices necessary for successful and sustainable ISD are outlined in the literature (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Bullock & Mahon, 2001; Carter & LeConey, 2004; Dattilo, 2002; Schleien, Ray, & Green, 1997). These sources emphasize the need for disability specialists, typically specified as Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists, and general recreation program staff to collaborate in designing, implementing, and evaluating ISD.

The disability specialist’s (i.e., inclusion facilitator’s) myriad roles usually include tasks such as assessing the needs of individuals with disabilities, developing inclusion or accommodation plans, overseeing the implementation of these plans, and evaluating program effectiveness (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Bullock & Mahon, 2001; Carter & LeConey, 2004; Schleien et al., 1997). Suggested roles for general recreation program staff complement the technical support provided by the specialist, but they begin with the understanding and ownership of an inclusive philosophy and know-how of how to accommodate participants of varying abilities. Once individuals with disabilities elect to participate in a program, the generalist’s role is to implement the accommodation plan, provide direct support to participants with disabilities similar to those without disabilities, and assist the specialist in the ongoing evaluation of the inclusive program.

In many cases, a participant with a disability has support needs that exceed those typically provided by program staff. Several approaches for meeting such di-

rect support needs have been described in the literature. For example, Blake (1996) described five staffing approaches: hiring staff specifically to work with participants with disabilities, hiring both specially trained staff and general program staff to cooperatively support participants with disabilities, hiring all general program staff with the expectation that they will include participants with disabilities, recruiting volunteers to provide direct supports for participants with disabilities, and allowing participants to provide their own worker to provide direct supports. Similarly, Anderson and Kress (2003) suggested the following options for providing direct supports to recreation participants with disabilities: hiring specially trained staff to provide one-to-one supports, hiring additional general recreation staff, recruiting volunteers, and developing a peer support program.

Initially, the need for increased direct support was addressed through volunteers. For example, Gold (1983) described a Leisure Buddy Program as a method to provide direct supports to participants with disabilities. The "leisure buddy" offered "guidance, individualized teaching, physical aid, and friendship" on a one-to-one basis (Gold, p. 14). Soon thereafter, many examples of this type of volunteer engagement were described in the literature, including volunteers referred to as "mainstreaming companions" (Richardson, Wilson, Wetherald, & Peters, 1987), "leisure buddies" (Bedini & Henderson, 1994), "volunteer advocates" (Rynders & Schleien, 1991), "leisure coaches" (Moon, 1994), and "trainer advocates" (Schleien et al., 1997). As Richardson et al. explained, these strategies helped to "ensure the normal flow and rhythm of an activity" and the successful participation of individuals with disabilities without "monopolizing recreation staff and pulling them away from others" (p. 13). The role of these volunteers has

been described as involving facilitation of interpersonal relationships between peers, provision of additional prompts and supports, development and implementation of adaptations, answering peers' inquiries about the nature of an individual's disability, implementing behavior management plans, teaching leisure skills, and evaluating quality of participation (Moon; Richardson et al; Schleien et al.).

Examples of direct support needs being addressed by paid staff members have also been reported (Hutchison, Mecke, & Sharpe, 2008; Sable, 1992; Scholl, Dieder, & Davison, 2005; Sullivan & O'Brien, 2001). These employees were described as possessing experience working with individuals with disabilities and provided similar supports as outlined for volunteers. Schleien et al. (1996) in their search for best practices in Minnesota found that 42% of agencies claiming to provide ISD provided peer partners. In national needs assessment on agency readiness to facilitate ISD, Devine and Kotowski (1999) discussed that nearly half of all inclusive agencies provided companions or leisure buddies to support participants with disabilities. Klitzing and Wachter (2005) noted that all agencies participating in their benchmark study were providing a buddy or leisure aide/companion. In all of these identified cases, there is no indication whether these roles were being fulfilled by paid or volunteer staff.

The development of peer companion programs to meet additional direct support needs has also been suggested as an option (Anderson & Kress, 2003; Schleien et al., 1997). Past research suggests that peer companions have been effective in fostering positive social interactions and friendship development between participants with and without disabilities (Schleien et al.). They were also found to be effective in assisting participants with disabilities in acquiring leisure skills necessary for suc-

cessful participation. Peers were trained to interact, provide appropriate prompts, and support their companions; however, they did not serve in support roles designed for paid staff (Schleien et al.). For example, peers were never asked to provide personal care assistance or implement behavior management plans.

With this general understanding of the various staffing approaches used to facilitate ISD, this study explored the specific staffing strategies used in recreation agencies across the U.S. Specific information concerning roles, qualifications, and how they were hired, prepared, and supervised, were sought from agencies who had a history of successful inclusive service delivery.

### **Methodology**

The data presented were collected during the initial phase of a comprehensive search for best practices in inclusive recreation across the U.S. (see Schleien, Miller, & Shea, 2009; Miller, Schleien, & Lausier, 2009). This broad research initiative, as well as the current study, was designed to yield data regarding best practices—at both the administrative and programmatic levels—currently being employed by agencies that have been deemed successful with ISD. In particular, a multiple case study design was implemented within a descriptive framework (Yin, 2003). Yin described case study methodology as optimal when addressing “how” questions (e.g., how do these agencies facilitate inclusion) regarding contemporary events where the researcher has little or no control.

### **Cases**

The research team used multiple steps to identify sites to increase the likelihood of gathering data from exemplary agencies. Agencies initially targeted were those that received awards for their ISD from the National Institute on Recreation Inclusion (NIRI). Additional agencies perceived to be

successful with ISD were identified through discussions with NIRI board members, noted ISD consultants, and four researchers known for their expertise in ISD. Finally, a snowballing technique was used, asking interviewees to identify other agencies that met our criteria. These methods resulted in a list of 22 agencies. While we recognize that there are many more agencies across the nation who are experiencing success with community recreation inclusion, this cohort was believed to be an excellent starting point.

Several criteria were used to ensure that agencies studied represented the basic qualities of ISD established in the literature. These criteria included having a mission statement with terminology that expressed a welcoming environment, designation of a staff member responsible for ISD, a systemic approach inclusion (i.e., inclusion supports present for participation in all agency programs and services versus a limited number of inclusive programs or settings), and a history of ISD covering at least 5 years (see Schleien et al., 2009 for a more detailed explanation of these criteria). Application of these criteria narrowed the cohort to 15 agencies. The final subject pool represented all but one of the National Recreation and Park Association’s eight geographic regions and a variety of community sizes across the U.S. (i.e., populations ranging from 3,000 to over 2.25 million).

### **Data Collection**

Interviews were conducted with the inclusion facilitator ( $n = 14$ ; i.e., the staff member designated by the agency as responsible for ISD) and/or administrator ( $n = 8$ ) from each of these 15 agencies using a semi-structured interview guide based on sensitizing concepts from the literature (Patton, 2002). Interviews were conducted and audio recorded over a 10-month period by the first two authors via telephone

or on-site visits and typically lasted from 1½ to 2 hours.

Interviewees consistently identified the use of “inclusion support staff” as critical to their inclusion success, leading to probes intended to encourage interviewees to divulge additional information on this practice. These probes inquired into the rationale for the use of inclusion support staff as a best practice; how frequently they were employed; how they were hired and trained; what skills, characteristics, background, and knowledge were assessed in their hiring; roles they played and the types of supports they provided; systematic fading of supports; and how they were paid, if at all.

### **Data Analysis**

Both researchers repeatedly read interview transcripts and coded elements of the narrative based on key content areas (e.g., roles, adaptations, preparing peers). The coding system was used to begin the data reduction process with both researchers reading and coding the transcripts independently. Coding was then compared, and where codes did not match, the researchers discussed the data and coding system until consensus was met. For example, the researchers discussed whether training of inclusion support staff should be coded identically to the preparation of general program staff. The resulting consensus to code them separately was then documented in memos allowing the coding system to be further defined and validated. Interviewees were then asked to review the findings for accuracy, completeness, fairness, and perceived validity so that their feedback could be documented, analyzed, and integrated into subsequent interviews and analyses (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Once the initial content analysis of each interview was complete, both researchers reviewed the reduced data within each code using cross-case synthesis (Yin,

2003) to identify patterns across cases as well as aspects unique to a particular agency (e.g., similarities and differences in support staff training approach). Findings were again compared across the two researchers to identify and resolve any inconsistencies.

### **Findings**

A wealth of information was gained regarding how direct supports were used to support the inclusion of participants with disabilities. The presentation of findings commences with a description of inclusion facilitators’ roles in order to clearly distinguish between their roles and those of inclusion support staff, and to provide precedence for the staffing terminology. Roles of inclusion support staff and their qualifications, as well as how they are hired, prepared, and supervised, will follow. Finally, data are reviewed regarding the use of alternative strategies for meeting direct support needs (e.g., volunteers, peer companions).

### **Roles of the Inclusion Facilitator**

All but two of the inclusion facilitators interviewed were Certified Therapeutic Recreation Specialists. Of the other two, one had an education in recreation administration, and the other, a degree in a related human service field. The myriad roles of inclusion facilitators bridged both administration and programming, which confirms the earlier findings of others (Miller et al., 2009; Schleien et al., 2009). In particular, inclusion facilitators’ roles at the programmatic level included technical support to programmers, but not direct support to participants. This finding is consistent with functions described in the literature (see Bullock & Mahon, 2001; Carter & LeConey, 2004; Schleien et al., 1997). Primary programmatic functions included conducting individualized assessments of participants with disabilities, developing

inclusion plans, planning for adaptations and accommodations, supervising inclusion support staff, training program staff, and evaluating the inclusive service delivery process. Again, these roles have been previously noted in the literature (see Miller et al.).

In larger agencies, inclusion facilitators supervised a small cohort of "inclusion specialists" who were responsible for assessing individual needs, developing inclusion plans, and implementing adaptations and accommodations. Experienced in serving individuals with disabilities and ISD, these "inclusion specialists" were responsible for programming responsibilities typically performed by the inclusion facilitator. Unlike the inclusion facilitator, they did not hold any administrative responsibilities (e.g., developing agency policies, goals, and funding strategies to support inclusion).

According to inclusion facilitators, the primary programmatic approach used to support participants with disabilities was the use of "inclusion support staff." Facilitators revealed that 80% or more of all accommodations to support inclusion was the employment of direct support staff. These paid staff members were considered to be an absolute necessity by inclusion facilitators, a perspective supported by others (Abery, 2003; Hutchison et al., 2008; Scholl, Dieser, et al., 2005; Sullivan & O'Brien, 2001). As one facilitator opined, "you cannot compromise quality, because that reinforces those stereotypes of 'the one kid with a disability ruining the summer camp for my kid' from the perspective of parents of nondisabled children."

It should be noted that there was an absence of paid inclusion support staff in only two of the 15 exemplary agencies. In these cases, agencies hired additional general recreation staff to reduce participant-to-staff ratios. This type of approach is one way of meeting direct support needs

outlined by Blake (1996). Interviewees suggested that participants with more significant needs typically chose to participate in segregated programs where participant-to-staff ratios were already manageable. This maneuver potentially narrowed the population that was included in general programs to those who were "higher functioning."

### **Roles of Inclusion Support Staff**

As previously described in the recreation literature (Hutchison et al., 2008; Sable, 1992; Scholl, Dieser, et al., 2005; Sullivan & O'Brien, 2001), inclusion support staff served a multitude of roles in exemplary agencies. They were reported to provide direct support to participants with disabilities, facilitated communication between stakeholders (i.e., participants, family members, and staff), and supported interaction between participants with and without disabilities.

In most instances, inclusion support staff lowered participant-to-staff ratios, and were described as being present "to support the individual to the level that the individual needs, but also to be part of the program staff." Devine and O'Brien (2007) reported that inclusive experiences were enjoyed more by everyone when inclusion support staff assisted participants with and without disabilities, and not just those with disabilities. In the current study, these staff members provided physical assistance and other prompts during activities and assisted with the development of leisure skills and socialization. They also made impromptu activity adaptations to facilitate participation.

Inclusion support staff provided one-on-one assistance when a participant had more substantial needs, which is a practice that has been both promoted in the literature and observed by others (Bullock & Mahon, 2001; Carter & LeConey, 2004; Sable, 1992; Sullivan & O'Brien, 2001). Partici-

pants' needs warranting increased attention included requiring extensive physical assistance, personal care assistance, and safety concerns (e.g., participant known to wander, significant inefficiencies in judgment, perception of danger). As one facilitator enumerated:

If we have a child with more compulsive behaviors in a gymnastics class, they can't just take off running in our gymnastics center because there are 12 other classes being taught at the same time. So there are safety issues. We tend to see more hands-on assistance in the gymnastics program.

At two of the 13 agencies using inclusion support staff, one-on-one supports were not provided. In these cases, participants requiring more significant levels of support were asked to bring along a care provider or companion, with no added participation fees. This practice is widely supported by others<sup>1</sup> (Komissar, Hart, Friedlander, Tufts, & Paiewonsky, 1997; Schleien et al., 1997).

In addition to providing direct supports to participants with disabilities, inclusion support staff also facilitated communication between stakeholders (e.g., participants and family members, program staff, inclusion facilitators), an important role for trainer advocates described by Schleien et al. (1997). One interviewee reflected, "It's constant communication and monitoring just to make sure things are going well [from everyone's perspective]; and if they're not, how can they change that?" Since inclusion support staff were more likely to have day-to-day contact with parents when dropping off and picking up their children, the support staff was responsible for keeping communication avenues open. Information was usually exchanged on relevant topics, such

as changes in medication and routines. This type of information helped inclusion support staff work proactively to facilitate program success.

Another commonly cited role for inclusion support staff was the facilitation of social interactions between participants, which is also supported in the literature (Devine & Parr, 2008; Hutchison et al., 2008; Schleien et al., 1997; Sullivan & O'Brien, 2001). Facilitators discussed preparing inclusion support staff to address questions like "what is wrong with him?" They were prepared to explain things to other participants in "appropriate, yet simple terms." They were trained to "accentuate the positives in the child" and "help peers identify similarities in one another," similar to the trainer advocacy roles outlined by Schleien et al. In addition, they taught peers how to use alternative communication strategies to increase interactions with less verbal and nonverbal participants. Devine and Parr reported that staff play significant roles in creating bonds between participants with and without disabilities, and are considered by participants to be predominantly responsible for making them feel comfortable in inclusive settings.

It was also noted that support staff promoted interactions between participants through their own modeling. As an inclusion facilitator illustrated, "they will be helping the child with the disability, but they will also be playing with the other children. In this way, they are modeling appropriate interactions." Recent studies have supported this role modeling as vitally important to the level of comfort and enjoyment experienced by participants with and without disabilities (Devine & O'Brien, 2007; Devine & Parr, 2008; Hutchison et al., 2008). Devine and O'Brien have noted that "Staff must be role models for inter-

<sup>1</sup> It is critical that professionals ensure ADA compliance when determining the level and nature of support that is legally required in regard to the unique needs of each individual participant.

dependence and send clear messages that communicate equal status" (p. 217).

### **Qualifications and Hiring**

In regard to qualifications and hiring, several interviewees downplayed the importance of experience among their support staff. For example, one interviewee commented that "anyone from high school students to retired teachers, often with no previous experience working with individuals with disabilities." Moreover, "When I advertise the position, it says 'experience is not necessary, will train' and I guess I sometimes prefer that they do not have a whole lot of experience." Another hiring facilitator explained:

Just because you have experience doesn't necessarily mean you're the most qualified. If you come in that door, and through conversations with me or through the interview process, I can see that you're somewhat easygoing, but you're attentive. You're responsible. You're flexible. You are willing to learn. If you're willing to learn, then I can help you learn what you need to do as an inclusion support staff.

A few inclusion facilitators described unsuccessful experiences hiring inclusion support staff with experience in the disability field. One facilitator recalled:

I did do one thing that I will not do again... the first year one little girl participated, I hired an 'autism specialist' as her support person. It was like having two bulls in a china cabinet... It was only a 2-week program and every day I prayed, 'how much longer do we have...'. There was the specialist who thought she knew everything about autism and this girl with autism determined to show her 'no you don't.' So the next year I

hired a young lady who had absolutely no experience and it went so much better... And that's why I really don't hire 'autism specialists' any longer.

The "no experience necessary" position, however, was not universal. One inclusion facilitator believed that experience was critical for the position, enumerating:

Inclusion is a setting in which we [inclusion facilitators] are not there on a daily basis to provide support and guidance. We don't put staff in unless they have had a fair amount of previous experience in working with children with disabilities. They need to be good adaptors to the agency, who are going to know how to handle difficult situations or sometimes difficult parents or park district staff, because we [facilitators] are not there to help. So, we typically have folks who already have some experience and who are more mature than some of the high school students.

Other representative qualities that were sought after when hiring support staff included: "exude an excitement for working with people who have disabilities... they want to better themselves... they want to make a difference... and they care." Inclusion facilitators typically searched for individuals who understood and believed in the concept of inclusion, as depicted by one facilitator, "they have a belief in the philosophy of inclusion and they can actually verbalize that to me." Anderson and Kress (2003) indicated that inclusion does not require anyone "'special'; rather it takes someone who has the attitude of accepting and understanding the diverse needs and abilities of participants" (p. 52). Abery (2003), however, noted that having a passion for inclusion is important, but that

staff should also have experience working with people with disabilities.

The process of hiring support staff varied across agencies based on their organizational structures. In agencies with a decentralized structure (i.e., where responsibility for inclusion lies in neighborhood centers where programming occurs), support staff were hired by general recreation program directors. In these scenarios, program directors often had the assistance of the inclusion facilitators in hiring appropriate support staff. In agencies using a centralized structure (i.e., one central unit within the agency holds the primary responsibility for inclusion in all units across the agency), inclusion support staff were hired by inclusion facilitators.

### **Preparing Inclusion Support Staff**

In most cases, staff hired as support personnel were provided extensive training that was specific to their roles in support of participants with disabilities. Inclusion facilitators usually conducted these sessions. They described training that typically occurred just prior to program start-up, and included “anything and everything that we feel they might need.” In most agencies, inclusion support staff also attended the general recreation training for the program in which they were to work. One facilitator noted:

All the support staff for summer programs attend one training that is designed specifically for the inclusion support staff. It is a 1½-day-long program, and it addresses everything including health issues, behavior management, accommodation, and administrative policies; all relevant to inclusion. They also go to the general recreation staff training which is scheduled on a different day so they could become knowl-

edgeable on the general operating procedures for that summer camp.

A variety of strategies were employed in preparing staff, including role playing, presentations by returning staff regarding their prior experiences, brainstorming sessions on how to address difficult situations, and examples from past programs. Training session topics included an explanation of the inclusion facilitator's expectations, administrative policies, and characteristics specific to particular disabilities. Furthermore, they received instruction on strategies and techniques concerning behavior management, health issues, designing adaptations, providing essential program structure, facilitating cooperative games and social interactions, and encouraging friendships. These agencies appeared to have incorporated the entire gamut of training topics discussed in the literature (Carter & LeConey, 2004; Sable, 1992; Schleien et al., 1997; Scholl, Smith et al., 2005). In addition, support staff were often provided with training manuals that contained information along related topics.

Inclusion support staff were also specifically prepared to work with particular individuals, a practice also supported by others (Carter & LeConey, 2004; Schleien et al., 1997; Scholl, Smith et al., 2005). “They get additional information when someone registers, and they have access to the participant's [accommodation] plan,” stated one facilitator. Several facilitators mentioned the sharing of information received from prior staff regarding returning participants and previously used accommodations and adaptations. One facilitator always included within these discussions a statement such as, “This is Johnny and he has autism spectrum disorder. I don't want you to be an autism expert. I want you to be a Johnny expert,” to emphasize the individualized support that was expected.

## **Supervising Inclusion Support Staff**

The supervision of inclusion support staff was often a complicated matter. Since support staff were working with participants in programs led by general recreation staff with minimal experience serving people with disabilities, they were often supervised by two staff members. One administrator explained that inclusion support staff, “take their day-to-day lead from the center that runs the program [general recreation programmer]. Issues regarding accommodations and other concerns about particular participants with disabilities are addressed by the inclusion facilitator.” Interviewees did not identify significant difficulties posed by this multiple-supervisor scenario.

## **Fading Inclusion Support Staff Accommodations**

Fading of supports is one aspect of inclusion that has proven difficult for some staff members, particularly those with minimal experience with ISD (Devine, 2003/2004; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & O’Brien, 2007). One interviewee described the necessity of planning ahead for the careful elimination of assistance:

I don’t necessarily like to provide a one-on-one. That’s not my first way of attempting to deal with the situation. If we need a one-on-one, we have it written in our policy that the team decides when it is necessary and for what duration. We build in periodic assessments to determine if a support system is naturally occurring and if we need to fade out.

Another facilitator explained that during training, inclusion support staff were informed that, “the goal is for them [participants with disabilities] to be included without assistance.” Moreover, training included instructions to “continually as-

sess the situation for what levels of service they actually need.” Support staff were also prepared to communicate with participants, family members, and program staff to determine appropriate levels of support believed to be necessary. The decision-making process of when and how to fade assistance was often supported by the inclusion facilitator through site visits that included suggestions on how to “step back a little.” Facilitators described their assessments in reference to fading as a “test the waters” approach. Several facilitators indicated that they communicate to support staff that demand for their assistance is high. Consequently, when a participant no longer requires assistance, there is always another participant in need of additional support in an inclusive program.

Previous research has identified the influence of the fading of supports, or lack thereof, on the social acceptance of participants with disabilities by their peers and vice versa. Actions such as being overly-protective, or providing too much support, caused participants with disabilities to feel unwelcomed by their peers (Devine, 2003/2004; Devine & Lashua, 2002; Devine & O’Brien, 2007). Conversely, when people’s abilities were emphasized, stereotypes challenged, and commonalities highlighted, program staff provided an atmosphere for a “culture of social acceptance” (Devine, 2004, p. 148).

## **Use of Volunteers to Provide Direct Supports**

Several agencies with longer inclusion histories experimented early on with the use of unpaid volunteers, rather than paid staff, to provide support to participants with disabilities. More recently, this approach was described as being rarely used. Interviewees were adamant about the need for paid inclusion support staff to “show up and be qualified.” Also, recruiting sufficient numbers of volunteers was not a

simple task, as one interviewee expressed, “they [volunteers] are not knocking down our doors.” While lack of dependability was a central concern that led to the substitution of volunteers by paid support staff, the intensity of supports was also a key consideration. For example, in summer day camp, a participant may require support for 8 or 9 hours a day, 5 days per week, for several consecutive weeks; potentially an unrealistic effort to expect from an unpaid volunteer.

Volunteers were used successfully during less intensive programming (e.g., 1 hour per week). Due to the “limited window” of time that support was necessary, hiring staff was often difficult to accomplish. Volunteers providing time-limited support typically did not pay registration fees and were oftentimes friends or family members of the participant with a disability.

### **Peer Supports**

The use of companions (without disabilities) to meet direct support needs of participants with disabilities was not identified as a practice by our interviewees; however, inclusion facilitators did identify the practice of empowering companions to help participants with disabilities become more involved in program activities (further described in Miller et al., 2009). Considering the positive outcomes associated with peer companionship models, the community recreation field should consider tapping into their peer resources in a more purposeful manner (Anderson, Schleien, McAvoy, Lais, & Seligmann, 1997; Carter, Cushing, Clark, & Kennedy, 2005; Carter, Sicso, Melekoglu, & Kurkowskiki, 2007; Schleien et al., 1997). For the peer companion model to be effective, it is essential that peers receive training on how to best support the participant with a disability.

### **Staff Divide**

Administrators and inclusion facilitators alike described what they viewed as potentially troubling scenarios where inclusion support staff were viewed as having sole responsibility for the participants with disabilities. Examples provided by one facilitator included:

Sometimes the programmer or program instructor will either ignore the support staff person that is there, and all the other kids will be saying, ‘who are you, who is that, why are they here?’ Or, they will introduce them as ‘so and so’s helper.’

One facilitator’s perspective that “they are not the support staff’s kid and they are not my kids; they’re everybody’s [all program staff’s] kids,” was reflective of the frustration communicated by several interviewees. Facilitators were concerned about the divide between support staff and program staff because they perceived it as creating “stigma” and “drawing negative attention” to particular individuals. They also felt that it “impeded social interactions” between participants. Hutchison et al. (2008) described a program that only hired staff who had experience working with individuals with disabilities and were hired under the expectation that all staff are responsible for providing direct inclusion supports at some point in time. The authors attributed some of the program’s success to this staffing strategy and described it as counterbalancing the staff divide that some of our interviewees expressed.

### **Discussion**

There is little doubt that administrators and inclusion facilitators of exemplary agencies perceived the roles of inclusion support staff as critical components of ISD. Inclusion support was predominantly provided by paid, part-time or seasonal staff, and a limited number of unpaid vol-

unteers. The roles of these staff members impacted the experiences of participants with and without disabilities as well as the general program staff. Their efforts freed up general program staff to focus on the broader implementation of programs. Support staff also helped participants with disabilities develop new skills for participation, implemented adaptations and provided hands-on assistance that facilitated full participation, encouraged social interactions between participants, and promoted communication between stakeholders in support of day-to-day program operations. While sophisticated and extensive, it is interesting to note that these roles were filled by staff members of whom inclusion facilitators described as often having very little or even no experience with people with disabilities.

The study's findings address the three key areas of: a) hiring appropriate staff members for the provision of such comprehensive supports, b) appreciating the crucial roles that inclusion facilitators have on the success of these supports, and c) the need for the development of alternative methods to more effectively support participants with disabilities in inclusive settings. All interviewees noted that appropriate staffing was the key to their ISD success. Effective staffing was defined by all but two of the participating agencies as the hiring of staff with titles and responsibilities reflecting their primary role in supporting participants with disabilities. Inclusion facilitators described these individuals as having complex responsibilities, yet they identified few qualifications for these individuals beyond an "understanding and belief in inclusion." A potential paradigm shift may be in order. Successful staffing may have more to do with hiring quality program staff and preparing them to accommodate all participants in a universal way, and less to do with hiring staff to fill

"special" positions to support "special" people. This could potentially eliminate the existing divide between specialists and general program staff that facilitators described within the study.

Inclusion facilitators play crucial roles in ISD. They perform administrative tasks and also make programmatic decisions that directly impact the experiences of participants with and without disabilities and the staff who serve them. Moreover, they make programmatic and budgetary decisions, such as when, where, and for how long inclusion support staff are used. They must balance their professional commitments to the provision of quality inclusive services and their fiduciary responsibility to make ISD affordable and sustainable. The professionals currently serving in such capacities should be highly commended for their ability to walk this tightrope. Professionals with a desire to serve as effective inclusion facilitators will need to gain a breadth and depth of knowledge and skills beyond that provided in typical therapeutic recreation undergraduate curricula. The further development of curricula at the baccalaureate and master's levels to ensure our next generation of successful inclusion facilitators may be necessary to sustain ISD.

Finally, it behooves the community recreation field to address the development and testing of alternative strategies that could meet the direct support needs of participants with disabilities for sustainable ISD. Staffing is the most costly component of ISD. Currently, 80% of all accommodations are in the form of inclusion support staff (Miller et al., 2009; Schleien et al., 2009). Continued reliance on these paid staff will most likely strain departmental budgets, having implications for the services provided to large constituencies. It may be prudent to consider the use of more extensive and purposeful volunteer and companionship programs to support

social inclusion. In the current study it was surprising to note the paucity of these individuals in currently existing inclusive programs. Ongoing recruitment and support of volunteers and companions, as well as other approaches to direct support, should be a primary focus of future practice and research endeavors in community recreation if social inclusion and sustainable practices are among our agencies' goals.

While the findings presented here are from a fairly large data base, it must be kept in mind that all data emanated from only 15 agencies providing ISD. A number of other limitations should also be acknowledged, including the inability to determine unequivocally that these 15 agencies were truly exemplary in nature (Schleien et al., 2009) since valid criteria for ISD do not currently exist. In addition, the nature of qualitative research makes it nearly impossible for researchers to be completely unbiased (Patton, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Due to extensive prior experience with ISD, it was important for the researchers to remain conscientious to the possibility of bias. Every effort was made by the researchers to review all data without maintaining preconceived ideas based on personal experience.

### Conclusion

Inclusive service delivery provides promise for the development of a civilization, described by Winters, where the designations "we" and "they" no longer exist. Continued progress in this direction will require the recreation and parks field to invest more heavily in the hiring, preparing, and support of highly qualified inclusion facilitators. It will be their responsibility to engage program staff—both specialized and general staff—to accommodate people of varying abilities in ongoing community programs. It is anticipated that inclusion facilitators will also be required to develop and fine-tune other practices, such as

the effective use of peer companions and trainer advocates. Perhaps the inclusion facilitator's greatest challenge will be in addressing the "we/they" designations among program staff in order for these staff members to prepare environments and facilitate programs where participants also shed their "we/they" distinctions, resulting in real social inclusion.

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