Inclusive Book Club: Perspectives of Undergraduate Participants

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Abstract

We examined undergraduate students' perceptions of peers with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) before and after participating in an inclusive book club on the college campus. Over a six-week period, undergraduate students and students with I/DD enrolled in the post-secondary education program at the university engaged in an inclusive book club that involved coming together once a week for an hour to discuss a piece of literature. Results indicate that the perceptions of the undergraduate students changed as a result of their participation in the book club. Although, prior to the onset of the study, the undergraduates predicted that the students with I/DD would have difficulty with comprehension and participation, at the end of the study they reported that the students with I/DD did not have the difficulties they predicted and were able to successfully participate and contribute to discussions during each book club meeting. Implications of the findings for K-12 learning environments and post-secondary inclusive programs are provided.

Inclusive Book Club: Perspectives of Undergraduate Participants

Over the past decade there has been an increasing number of post-secondary programs for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) created at colleges and universities across the country, making dreams of going to college a reality for these young adults. There are now over 250 post-secondary programs for students with I/DD available nationwide. Advocacy efforts to support families in affording the tuition costs involved have been extremely successful. Students enrolled in programs recognized as Comprehensive Transition Programs by the U.S. Department of Education are able to apply for federal Pell Grant funds to support their tuition expenses. Vocational Rehabilitation programs across the nation are also providing clients with financial support. Additionally, opportunities for state and local scholarships and grants are also an option for eligible students. Overall, students with I/DD are being welcomed to campuses and experiencing positive outcomes when it comes to competitive employment (Green, Cleary, & Cannella-Malone, 2017; Grigal, Hart, Smith, Domin, & Weir, 2016; Moon, Simonsen, & Neubert, 2011; Zafft, Hart, & Zimbrich, 2004), increased independence (Miller, DiSandro, Harrington, & Johnson, 2016; Neubert & Redd, 2008), and improved social and emotional well-being (Hughson, Moodie, Uditsky, 2006; Papay, Trivedi, Smith, & Grigal, 2017).

While the outcomes of students with I/DD participating in post-secondary programs is well-documented, the literature lacks a discussion of the impact of these programs on traditional college students who have the benefit of interacting with their peers with I/DD. There are various ways that traditional students interact with peers with I/DD on college campuses including structured experiences such as serving as peer mentors or job coaches as well as natural experiences that occur in courses, employment sites, residence halls, clubs and organizations,

sporting events, and a variety of other campus-wide recreational activities. The purpose of this study was to examine undergraduate students' perceptions of peers with intellectual and developmental disabilities (I/DD) before and after participating in an inclusive book club.

Recruting Students with I/DD and Book Selection

All students enrolled in the post-secondary program for students with I/DD on campus were invited to participate in the book club. The lead researcher met with the group to provide information about the book club and stimulate interest. Five of the students with I/DD elected to participate. To select a book for the inclusive book club, an interest survey was administered to the students with I/DD to determine what genres of fiction and nonfiction they prefer reading, how they choose books they want to read, the best book they ever read, their top three favorite books and movies, and how they like to spend their free time. The majority of these students indicated that they enjoyed reading fiction that focused on adventure, survival, and science fiction. Given that the participants had different reading levels, it was important to select a text that had an audio-version available. After conversations with the students and learning more about their interests, The Maze Runner by James Dashner (2009) was selected for the book club.

Recruiting Undergraduate Students

Information about the book club was then shared with members of student organizations and posted to the university's social media accounts. The only excluding criteria was undergraduates serving as peer mentors or working with the post-secondary program in any capacity. Four undergraduate participants volunteered to participated including one elementary education major, two special education majors, and one English major.

Preparation for the Book Club

Prior to the start of the book club, trainings were delivered to each group of participants. For the students with I/DD, the training included: 1) a mini-lesson on book clubs (what they are, how they work); 2) a discussion about student responsibilities and behavioral expectations; and 3) planning for successful participation. Students were provided a reading schedule which outlined what had to be read prior to each book club meeting. The lead researcher assisted students in setting reminders in their phones for each session (day, time, location of meeting, required reading).

Prior to the training for the undergraduate group, a questionnaire was administered to determine the undergraduates' perceptions of peers with I/D before participating in the book club. This 18-item questionnaire included demographic information, questions regarding participants' experience and beliefs about individuals with developmental disabilities, expectations for the project, and predictions about participation and potential challenges. This same questionnaire was given to the undergraduate group after participating in the book club to examine any shifts in perceptions as a result of the experience. The training for the undergraduates included: 1) an overview of the post-secondary program for students with I/DD and a brief description of each student that would be participating in the book club; 2) a discussion about student responsibilities and behavioral expectations; 3) planning for successful participation.

After the trainings were completed, every book club participant received a hard copy of the book and downloaded the audio-version on their personal devices. The lead researcher then met with all book club participants as a group. Refreshments were served and icebreaker games were played to help participants get to know each other. At this meeting, expectations for participating in the book club were reviewed, supports that could be used before, during, and after reading (see Table 1) were discussed, and participants were encouraged to add to the list with strategies they use while reading. The group then reviewed the reading schedule, had the opportunity to take supplies (highlighters, post-it notes), and were provided with discussion questions for each chapter to help support their reading.

Table 1. *Supports for Book Club Participants*.

Before Reading	During Reading	After Reading *Prior to Book Club meeting
- read through the discussion questions - look back to previous chapter - review previous discussion notes	-listen to the audio version while following along in your book -use post it notes to show your thinking -use a highlighter to mark important parts of the text -make voice recorded notes -make predictions -answer some/all discussion questions -make personal connections to what you're reading -try to put yourself in the characters' shoes	Need something to share with the group: -share your perspectice on a character(s) -write a journal entry -create a summary -complete a graphic organizer -draw picture of a character (or an event from the story) -ask a question -describe your favorite part -share a personal connection you made

Book Club Procedures

Each book club meeting lasted approximately one hour, and the lead researcher served as the book club facilitator. Before starting the discussion about the literature, five to ten minutes were set aside to allow the group to have informal social conversations about matters other than the book. The purpose of these exchanges at the beginning of the meeting was to get the group comfortable and limit unnecessary conversations during the literature discussion. Each formal book club discussion opened with a summary of the assigned reading. This was done to ensure everyone understood and remembered what happened in the story. Following the summary, the conversations led to various discussions such as checking predictions, making connections to real life, putting themselves in a character's shoes, and asking questions to clarify understanding. The facilitator allowed the conversation to develop naturally and would only intervene if the conversation changed to something off topic or if the discussion stopped. Prompts included asking a question, making a statement about the reading, or referring to the discussion questions for the chapter. At the end of the discussion, the session would close with the group making predictions about the next chapter.

Supports for Students with I/DD

There were a variety of supports provided to the students with I/DD to facilitate their successful participation during book club meetings. All students with I/DD were provided with an audio version of the book. At the onset of each session, there was a facilitated summarization activity to support comprehension. Both the students with I/DD and the undergraduate students contributed to the summarization discussion. There were also review questions provided to support students before, during, and after reading for the purposes of supporting comprehension and facilitating discussions.

Findings

Perception data was collected through a written questionnaire (see Figure 1) to determine if the perspectives of undergraduate students about their peers with I/DD changed as a result of participating in the book club.

Questionnaire for Undergraduates
Book Study Project

	not at all			a little		very much
1) Did you like participating in this book study? Why or why not?		1	2	3	4	5
2) Would you like to participate in this type of project again? Why or why not?		1	2	3	4	5
3) Should other undergraduate students have this opportunity? Why or why not?	1	2	3	4	5	

4) What did you like about participating in the book study?

5) What did you not like about participating in the book study?

6) Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experience in the book study?

Figure 1. *Project questionnaire*.

The analysis of the questionnaires led to three common themes related to the undergraduate students' perspectives of their peers with I/DD. First, although the questionnaires given at the onset of the study indicated that the undergraduates predicted that the students with I/DD would have a difficult time comprehending the literature and making connections to the book, this perception changed by the end of the book club. Some comments the undergraduates reported on the questionnaire at the conclusion of the book club include:

- "The students [with I/DD] blew me away with their ability to keep up with the reading and comprehend the story; even the small details."
- "I learned that the students [with I/DD] are more than able to keep up with the pace."
- "The students were able to offer opinions as well as conversation and connections outside of the maze runner. For example, Kenna was comparing the movie to the book during the book study offering her insight and predictions for the next chapter."

Second, prior to the onset of the book club**,** the undergraduate students predicted that the students with I/DD would have difficulty voicing their opinions, putting thoughts into words, understanding hidden messages, and developing visual images of the book while reading. However, at the conclusion of the study, the undergraduate students reported that the students with I/DD did not face any of the challenges they predicted they would face, and in fact, they faced the same challenges as the undergraduate students. Both groups had challenges with keeping up with the readings and initiating discussions that would engage the whole group. Third, the undergraduate students recognized that students with and without disabilities had background knowledge to bring to the discussion. One undergraduate student wrote, "I was able to witness different viewpoints and perspectives about the ideas and events within the book."

Implications

The results of this study indicate that the perceptions of undergraduate students about their peers with I/DD were significantly altered as a result of their participation in an inclusive book club. Prior to their participation, the undergraduate students predicted that the students with I/DD would have great difficulty with comprehension and participation. However, these perceptions changed as they discovered that their peers with I/DD were able to actively participate and successfully comprehend the material with some basic supports provided throughout the study (e.g. audio version of the book, summarization activities, and review questions). These findings suggest that when typically developing peers have opportunities to interact with students with I/DD in inclusive contexts, they quickly learn that these students can be active contributors regardless of their identified disabilities. Similar types of inclusive literacy experiences should be embedded within the contexts of K-12 schools. Book clubs such as the one described in this study can be replicated in elementary, middle, and high school settings to enrich the academic and social learning of students with and without disabilities. Likewise, post-secondary programs for students with I/DD should consider ways to provide quality inclusive academic and social experiences to benefit students with and without disabilities.

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