Social Inclusion of Students With Intellectual Disabilities: Global Evidence From Special Olympics Unified Schools

Special Olympics Global Center for Inclusion in Education

Michelle Yin, PhD and Jacqueline Jodl, PhD
About the Global Center

The Global Center for Inclusion in Education began in 2020 as a conceptual framework: it would serve as a centralized resource of support for the expanding network of Special Olympics Unified Schools with their three components of school-based Unified Sports, Inclusive Youth Leadership, and Whole School Engagement. The foundational goal of the Global Center is to illuminate, broaden, and intensify the impact of the 2019 World Games in Abu Dhabi by driving targeted, grassroots change for social inclusion across the globe using the Middle East and North Africa Region as a foundation. This includes serving as a hub for evaluation research on inclusive programming, as well as for basic research on the development of inclusive mindsets across cultures. To help achieve this goal, the Center will support a series of research and policy briefs on topics critical to inclusion in education. These briefs will bring Special Olympics experts together with thought partners in the research and policy fields related to education and youth development and their intersection with Unified Sports programming.

About the Authors

Michelle Yin, PhD, is associate professor in the School of Education and Social Policy at Northwestern University (Illinois), where she is also director of the Dual Master’s Degree Program, offered jointly with The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Michelle works at the nexus of education and labor economics, with a focus on special populations that include people with disabilities, youth at risk of not graduating from high school, and adult literacy learners. She earned both her MA and PhD degrees in economics from the University of Florida.

Jacqueline Jodl, PhD, is the Senior Vice President of Global Youth and Education at Special Olympics. Before joining Special Olympics, Jackie was an Associate Professor at the University of Virginia, focusing on social-emotional development, education innovation, and race and education. Previously, Jackie was an Executive Director at The Aspen Institute, where she oversaw one of the Institute’s most critical endeavors in education. Jackie earned her bachelor’s degree from the University of Minnesota, MBA from the University of Chicago, master’s degree from Teachers College, and PhD from Columbia University.
Introduction

In every corner of the globe, learners with intellectual disabilities (ID) face multiple challenges stemming from social exclusion and active isolation by educational institutions—challenges that can extend into adulthood and become barriers to employment. For young people with ID, negative attitudes towards their disability are among the most frequently cited barriers to inclusion, second only to others’ lack of knowledge about ID. Social isolation, high levels of stigma, and bullying characterize this exclusionary behavior, resulting in inequities in educational access. This inequitable access in turn has a negative impact on the progress of students with disabilities and on the overall quality of their education as they struggle to participate in meaningful learning due to an inability to feel secure in their school environment.

Exclusion also deprives youth without disabilities. It deprives them of the opportunity to learn from a more diverse set of peers, preventing them from developing skills they need in order to contribute fully within a global economy and society. Youth of all abilities must develop core skills around acceptance of diversity and communication if they are to function and succeed in a world that increasingly requires multicultural understanding and competency. These core skills include social-emotional skills that are essential to both school and workforce success.

A recent survey of employers found that 40 percent reported a lack of social-emotional competencies, often referred to as “soft skills,” amongst young people entering the workforce. Therefore, challenging attitudinal barriers and promoting the social inclusion of students with ID are crucial to supporting the healthy development of all youth, as evidenced by positive school experiences and longer-term professional success.

What Is Special Olympics Unified Schools?

Special Olympics Unified Schools is a co-curricular model that uses the inclusive sports model, Special Olympics Unified Sports, as a platform to promote meaningful social inclusion by bringing together young people with and without ID to lead in the creation of accepting school environments. The multi-pronged question arising from this discussion is: How do we convene young people with and without ID to address these challenges and foster a sense of belonging and purpose? To ferret out some actionable answers, Special Olympics undertook an evaluation of one of its flagship intervention programs—Unified Schools—as it operates in four selected countries. This brief presents the findings of that evaluation, called the Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study (usually referred to in this report as simply the Study).

Through targeted support in 14 countries and territories, Unified Schools has engaged nearly 200,000 youth by providing opportunities for young people with and without ID to participate in a wide range of sporting activities and events. The Unified Schools model creates regular opportunities for the implementation of Unified Sports®—brings together similarly apportioned teams composed of members with and without ID who train and compete against each other. The evaluation results highlighted in this brief describe the impact of the Unified Schools model on the social inclusion of youth with ID in four countries served by Special Olympics.
The goal is to facilitate healthy relationships among students with disabilities by engaging them in inclusive sports, where they can work together across differences.

Despite the steady progress in improving global social inclusion, many countries still operate school systems that are largely segregated for students with disabilities, especially students with ID. In order to be responsive to the realities of education access for students with ID, Special Olympics has developed three primary models of Unified Schools programming. Depending on a country’s educational system, the Unified Schools model may be adapted in any of the following ways: (a) in the Integrated Schools model, the program is implemented in schools that serve students both with and without ID; (b) in the Segregated Schools model, the program is implemented through a partnership between a mainstream school for students without ID and a special education school for students with ID; and (c) in the School–Community model, the program is implemented through a partnership between a mainstream school and community partners who serve youth with disabilities (Figure 1).

More than a decade of ongoing evaluations of the Unified Schools program within the United States have shown positive impacts at both the school and student levels. For example, 95 percent of schools report that the program creates a more inclusive school environment, and 85 percent of participating students report learning how their emotions and attitudes affect others and the importance of standing up for their beliefs.

Students participating in Unified Schools report significantly improved attitudes toward peers with ID and improved perceptions of school social inclusion, as well as increased social interaction with peers with ID. However, few studies have been conducted on the implementation or impact of Unified Schools outside the United States. In order to effectively scale Special Olympics Unified Schools globally, it is critical to understand the extent to which the model can be adapted to suit the contexts of different countries and whether the model has similar impacts across this diversity of settings and local adaptations.

To help address this need, the Social Inclusion Study examined the impact of Unified Schools in four countries that are part of Play Unified: Learn Unified—a multi-year initiative supported by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation.

Play Unified: Learn Unified has offered an unprecedented opportunity to adapt and expand Unified Schools to a wide range of cultural contexts and education systems. The evaluation Study focused on four countries in the Play Unified: Learn Unified project: China, Greece, India, and Kenya. These countries were selected because they represent a variety of geographic regions as well as diverse contexts and education systems. The evaluation Study focused on four countries in the Play Unified: Learn Unified project: China, Greece, India, and Kenya.
was conducted in each of the countries to evaluate the relationship between participation in Unified Schools and students' awareness, perceptions, and attitudes towards social inclusion and school climate change, as well as their development of social-emotional learning (SEL) skills.

Though the effect size varied across the participating countries, students with and without ID reported improved social-emotional skills, especially relative to managing relationships and social awareness. Not only did results indicate large positive changes in social-emotional skills, but students without ID reported overwhelmingly positive changes in interactions with and behavior towards students with ID. Positive effects extended to indicators of school culture and climate—including reductions in bullying, teasing, and offensive language—as well as greater awareness of social inclusion as measured by a sense of community and students being proactive in helping others in their school. The most striking finding illustrated that Unified Schools can mitigate and reverse the negative attitudes of peers without ID, which are a leading barrier to students with ID being able to experience inclusive school communities and learning environments. These results suggest a promising path forward to improving interactions and behaviors beyond the schoolhouse to the surrounding communities. Findings in all three of these areas—social-emotional skills, school climate and culture, and the social acceptance and inclusion of students with ID—are outlined below.

Inclusive Mindsets: Creating Opportunities for Shared Experiences

One of the most important goals of Unified Schools is to improve the interactions and behaviors of students without ID toward their peers with ID. As demonstrated by evidence in a range of contexts, negative attitudes among students without ID are a leading barrier to positive interactions and behaviors towards students with ID. Prior research also reveals that these attitudes can be changed significantly by creating shared experiences where those with and without ID work together and learn from each other. Across the four countries included in this evaluation Study, participation in Unified Schools programming was found to correlate with improved interactions between students with and without ID. Importantly, students without ID overwhelmingly reported that after program participation they experienced a substantial amount of positive change in their interactions with students with ID (Figure 3a). Students without ID also reported dramatically improved behaviors toward their peers with ID (Figure 3b).
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Citizenship. Attitudes such as these are essential building blocks in creating socially inclusive schools for all students, where differences are celebrated as strengths.

Qualitative data from in-depth interviews provide further insight into these findings. Parents and caregivers of students both with ID and without ID noted that the attitudes of students without ID reflected greater sensitivity and devotion toward students with ID after participation in the Unified Schools program. Both groups of parents and caregivers also shared that Unified Schools promoted a feeling that students with ID were not different. In addition, parents and caregivers of students with ID shared that their motivation for allowing their children to participate in Unified Schools was a desire for them to experience activities with exposure to peers with and without ID. As discussed in greater detail below, such experiences are instrumental in building the mindset essential to cultivating skills and competencies that are fundamental to creating healthy school and community settings where all young people can learn and develop.

When you walk into a school with a healthy climate and culture, you see students and staff who are caring, respectful, and committed to each other, their school communities, and the broader world. In these schools, such values are not just posters on the walls. Rather, they become part of the living, breathing fabric of the school, permeating day-to-day interactions and instructional practices. Students, educators, families, and the community all play a role in co-creating an inclusive school culture. The result is a learning setting that promotes the academic performance and social-emotional development of all students—both with and without intellectual differences.

For students with and without ID, as well as for school personnel (teachers, coaches, and administrators), the Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study showed a positive correlation between program participation and improved school climate and awareness of social inclusion. As Figure 4 reveals, 86 percent of students with and without ID in India positively rated the impact of the Unified Schools program on increasing the sense of community in the school. In Kenya the results were even more impressive. Nearly 100 percent of students with ID and nine out of ten students without ID indicated that Unified Schools increased a sense of community in their schools. Across both countries, strong results were also revealed for reducing bullying, teasing, or use of offensive language in school and for helping students within the school. While the changes were rated highly by both groups of students, it is interesting to note that in every category but one, a higher proportion of students with ID than students without ID endorsed these positive changes.
Students without ID perceived a positive change, perhaps indicating the personal significance of Unified Schools' programming benefits for historically marginalized students. School personnel corroborated these student reports of the impact of Unified Schools on school culture. Over 80 percent of participating teachers, coaches, and administrators in India and nearly 100 percent in Kenya reported an increased sense of community in their school after involvement (Figure 5).

These findings are particularly significant because of the diversity of schools participating in the project. Many of the schools that were surveyed do not have an integrated schools model, meaning that students with ID are placed in separate schools. In India, educators in the general education schools described the Unified Schools program as fostering a more inclusive school environment and promoting positive changes in discipline in the schools, which in turn contributed to an improved school climate. They also remarked that the program fostered trust and politeness among participating high school students and that the relationships among students in the mainstream schools had improved. All educators interviewed indicated that their schools developed more inclusive environments as a result of participating in the Unified Schools program.

A large and growing body of evidence demonstrates that social-emotional skills and competencies are a critical component of human development and lead to improved outcomes in school, career, relationships, and emotional well-being. Results from the Social Inclusion Study of four countries confirm that students with and without ID who participate in Unified Schools report positive changes in social-emotional skills. As depicted in Figure 6, across the four countries studied, students without ID reported having high levels of multiple social-emotional skills after participating in Unified Schools. Again, a more in-depth analysis was conducted in Greece and the results were particularly striking. Students without disabilities were asked to

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**Figure 5: School Personnel's Perceptions of the Impact of Unified Schools on School Climate and Culture**

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responded: “Moderately” to &quot;Significantly&quot;</th>
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<td>India</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Increased sense of community</td>
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<td>Provided more sports opportunities</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoted student leadership</td>
<td>75%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increased student confidence</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenya</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased sense of community</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provided more sports opportunities</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoted student leadership</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased student confidence</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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**Social-Emotional Learning**

A large and growing body of evidence demonstrates that social-emotional skills and competencies that students with and without ID who participate in Unified Schools report positive changes in social-emotional skills. Across the four countries studied, students without ID reported having high levels of multiple social-emotional skills that students with and without ID who participate in Unified Schools report positive changes in social-emotional skills. Again, a more in-depth analysis was conducted in Greece and the results were particularly striking. Students without disabilities were asked to...
rate themselves twice—pre- and post-participation in Unified Schools—on four social-emotional skills, such as being patient with others. As depicted in Figure 7, the analysis reveals that after participation in the Unified Schools program, students were 9.45 times more likely to choose a higher rating on whether they can learn from people who are different from themselves; 10.03 times more likely to choose a higher rating that they learned to be patient with others; 16.07 times more likely to choose a higher rating in terms of understanding how their emotions and actions affect others; and 9.57 times more likely to choose a higher rating on whether they can make their school a better place. These results indicate that significant growth is likely to occur in students' social-emotional skills during the time they participate in Unified Schools.

These findings were underscored by qualitative focus groups in Kenya where parents indicated that their children benefited from participating in the Unified Schools program through improved social-emotional competencies. During the focus group discussions, one of the parents candidly reported, "My child's hyperactivity and fights [have] reduced." Other parents expressed similar views with such comments as:

"My child is able to interact with other children, even at home."

"My child is now exercising, empathetic, and very considerate."

"My child has gained self-control."

These observations were echoed during interviews with school educators. As a school staff member at a participating school in India observed, "Students have become more confident, and secondary relations between others have also improved."

Special Olympics believes that the scaling of our vision for schools and communities of inclusion begins with a global policy agenda. In fact, one of the universal truths of education is that the scaling of high-quality practice depends largely on the enabling conditions created by policy. The experience of Special Olympics over the past two decades speaks to the role that policy plays in creating environments that make meaningful inclusion possible for people across the world. Our research enhances the empirical evidence that when governments commit politically and financially to policy agendas that support inclusion, inclusive practices flourish as young people with and without ID transform school settings into communities of acceptance and inclusion. This transformative power of Special Olympics programming is evident in such diverse contexts as the United Arab Emirates, the United States, Morocco, and Chile, where governments committed both politically and financially to policy agendas that support inclusion.

15 Short of a policy agenda that calls on governments to commit both politically and financially, a future that "leaves no one behind," as declared by the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, will be difficult to envision, let alone attain.
The findings of this research point to three critical implications for policymakers and other authorities in the realm of education. These needs are: (a) to address underlying attitudinal barriers faced by students with disabilities, (b) to promote experiential and inclusive social-emotional learning programs, and (c) to enable practitioners to deepen their impact through evidence-based interventions such as Unified Schools.

As previously discussed, a major driver of the continued exclusion of learners with disabilities from formal educational opportunities is some individuals' negative attitudes towards disability of any kind. The Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study shows that providing students without ID with regular and repeated opportunities to interact with their peers with ID in inclusive programming helps develop more inclusive attitudes and behaviors. This finding is significant in that it demonstrates how interventions such as Unified Schools and organizations such as Special Olympics could serve as implementation partners for education leaders seeking to address attitudinal barriers as they strive to make their systems more inclusive.

For generations, sports-based experiences have shown themselves to be an effective setting in which to teach social-emotional skills. This Study suggests that a co-curricular, sports-based, and disability-inclusive intervention can effectively cultivate social-emotional skills in youth across cultural contexts. In fact, the Study supports the robust finding in the broader research that sports-based experiences are one of the most effective settings for teaching social-emotional skills. It is notable that positive SEL outcomes were seen in students both with and without disabilities, demonstrating one of the Study’s most important findings: the benefits of shared experiences in building inclusive mindsets and social-emotional skills is not limited to students with disabilities. In other words, disability inclusion is not only a matter of equity; it also benefits the overall development of human capital. This finding should be awarded crucial consideration for policy discussions as education systems worldwide work to implement more disability-inclusive education policies and establish international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Although Unified Schools was first developed and evaluated in the United States, this Study shows that the theory of change on which the model is based has global relevance. Promoting a positive school climate and culture and facilitating healthy relationships among students with and without disabilities can be achieved by engaging them in inclusive sports, where they can work together across differences. Importantly, results indicate that programming can be localized and adapted to fit a variety of cultural contexts and education systems while achieving similarly positive results. This adaptability is particularly key for those countries working to implement inclusive programming through partnerships between mainstream and special education schools in systems that are still predominantly segregated.

It is critical that promising practices developed within one country’s context can be adapted to fit different cultural contexts, and that these adaptations be rigorously studied to see how the effectiveness of different interventions does or does not hold across countries. Evaluations...
States have shown that participation in the program by students without ID resulted in improved perceptions of school-based social inclusion of students with ID, and increased social interactions with students with ID. Now, the Unified Schools Social Inclusion Study—the first global evaluation of the model—has attained similar results in sample populations from China, Greece, India, and Kenya, lending support for the expansion of the Unified Schools model internationally.

The field of inclusive education lacks international empirical evidence with rigorous designs and needs a better understanding of the mechanism behind how social inclusion correlates with learning and long-term human capital accumulation. Our Study presents a research-grounded collaborative model that can be replicated in other countries and contexts.

Not only does this model develop international evaluation capacity and enable global partners to help support policy decision-making that is research-based and data-driven. Education systems around the world are striving to measure up to the obligations enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that help to support policy decision-making that is research-based and data-driven. Education systems around the world are striving to measure up to the obligations enshrined in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified the need for new ways to ensure education systems are accessible and inclusive for all. At the same time, this worldwide health crisis has underscored the needs all students have to develop social-emotional skills. By providing inclusive experiences to play and learn together, the Unified Schools program addresses not only the needs of learners with ID but also the needs of students without disabilities. It builds a platform for collaboration among stakeholders across systems to reach the ultimate goal of empowering youth of all abilities with the skills they need to create and thrive in a more inclusive future.

We would like to acknowledge our country evaluation partners and their invaluable contributions to this project, including the following universities and their lead principal investigators:

- **Fujian-Normal University**
  and Dr. Yandan Wu in China
- **National and Kapodistrian University of Athens**
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- **Amity University Uttar Pradesh**
  and Dr. Kalpana Sharma in India
- **Kenyatta University**
  and Dr. Jane Wairimu in Kenya

Acknowledgements
For further reading please see Nowicki & Sandieson (2002) for a meta-analysis of research studies published from 1990 to 2000 examining attitudes toward children with disabilities. The authors conclude that children without disabilities generally preferred to interact with children without either physical or intellectual disabilities. In a related study of upper school students, McDougall et al. (2004) examined the attitudes toward students with disabilities and found the majority had attitudes classified as neutral to positive, but slightly over 20 percent had negative attitudes.
References


As the world navigates its way toward a post-pandemic setting, the global community has demonstrated a growing focus on the urgency of inclusion, not as a political ideology but as a social construct in response to a tragic public health crisis that has disproportionately impacted those most at risk. School closures as a result of the pandemic have exposed and exacerbated exclusion from education for children and youth with disabilities, who were already the most excluded group pre-COVID-19. Remote learning solutions are often inaccessible or inappropriate to the educational needs of students with disabilities. The loss of routine engagement and social connection is particularly damaging for youth with ID and is known to exacerbate other mental health conditions, such as depression in youth without ID. Access to inclusive sport will be critical to ensure that all children and youth are served in the global recovery. [I am struggling here with how to end the brief. We have to address the reality of COVID is here to stay for the next year or two. And youth are at greater risk given they will be the last to be vaccinated and arguably the most impacted by the COVID consequence of social exclusion. Should we create remote sport – it is not crazy – and our

References

Students participating in Special Olympics Unified Schools programming in Greece (Hellas)