

CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to document the positive impact of participation in school-based Unified Sports programming “beyond the playing field” for elementary school children with and without disabilities. While benefits of participation in Unified Sports for both athletes and partners have previously been documented (Norins et al., 2008; Siperstein et al., 2001), their translation to the school context has not been considered. This is particularly relevant in light of increasing evidence that sport and recreational programming offers important school-related benefits to general education students (Fletcher et al., 2003; Howie, et al, 2010; Watts et al., 2008), as well as improvements in their social competence (e.g. Fletcher, Nickerson, Wright, 2003; Howie, et al., 2010).

Similar to the findings of previous studies, athletes and partners reported more positive self-concept at the end of their Unified Sports experience, particularly in the area of social acceptance. They also reported expanded opportunities for friendships with their Unified Sports teammates and improvements in existing friendships, changes which were particularly robust for athletes. (However, no significant changes in social skills, academic competence, or school adjustment were indicated in teacher rating scales or in observational data collected by project staff.) It is possible that students’ self-perceived changes precede measurable transformations in behavior and, with time, these improvements would be reflected in standardized measures. In other words, perhaps Unified Sports has a direct positive impact on students’ (particularly students with disabilities) sense of self, but these internal transformations are not immediately quantifiable in terms of specific observable behaviors. (On the other hand, teachers’ general (qualitative) observations of the impact of Unified Sports corroborated the positive shifts in self-concept and social interactions reported by athletes and partners. These findings, in combination with qualitative teacher feedback that revealed shifts in partners’ attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, suggest that Unified Sports does indeed provide a valuable context for social inclusion.)

Beyond the exploration of the impact of Unified Sports on school-aged participants’ social and academic competence, (this study demonstrated that the Unified Sports experience is not singular, and, in fact, can vary appreciably.) In their 2001 national evaluation of Unified Sports, Siperstein and colleagues concluded that “there is considerable variability around key aspects of program implementation at state and local levels” (p.24). (Almost a decade later, the present study also found great variability in program implementation.) (More specifically, there were notable differences in: 1) team composition, particularly the disability diagnosis of athletes and the selection criteria of partners; 2) the training and preparation of coaches; and 3) coaches’ interpretations of the goals of Unified Sports which informed the specific practices and activities implemented during practices.) In turn, these variations translated into very different experiences for the students involved.

(The results of this study suggest that when partners are selected on the basis of their positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, when the potential for behavior problems in both athletes and partners is minimized,) and (when coaches focused on building team cohesion (rather than on individual skills), the participating athletes and partners share more positive social

interactions, express greater enjoyment of their Unified Sports experience, and minimize partner dominance.) While this study does not allow us to draw conclusions about how these differences on the playing field impact athletes and partners *beyond* the playing field, it does suggest that this question needs to be addressed. In other words, the results discussed here suggest that it is critical to better understand how coaches' practices, in terms of their definition of athlete and partner and also their goals for participants, shape not only the experiences of athletes and partners within the Unified Sports program, but the way their participation impacts other aspects of their lives, particularly in educational settings. The results of the study also allow for the opportunity to provide several specific suggestions that can help guide SO in ensuring consistently high-quality Unified Sports programming as they continue to be a leader in bringing inclusive sports experiences to young people in the United States and around the world.

(First, it is suggested that SO clearly articulate the goal of social inclusion as central to the mission of Unified Sports, and that this mission be prominently featured not only in the Unified Sports Handbook and on the SO website, but also clearly communicated as part of coach training.) Results of this study strongly suggest, as do the findings of prior research, that Unified Sports provides a valuable context for social inclusion not only in terms of improvements in the social relationships of athletes but also improved attitudes on the part of the partners. Therefore, (while Unified Sports has come to be regarded and accepted as a program that does indeed provide a valuable opportunity for promoting the social inclusion of athletes, SO needs to keep pace with this evolution and re-position the Unified Sports program more definitively and explicitly.) This is particularly salient given that Unified Sports, particularly in the Unified States, is most often implemented in the school setting; for example, Unified Sports is a pillar of the Project UNIFY initiative, which holds social inclusion as a core value and is being implemented in schools across the US. Further, the Unified Sports Handbook specifies that "a school setting also requires efforts to make the Unified Sports program accepted within the school community... steps need to be taken to both highlight the Unified Sports team and engender school pride in it" (Special Olympics, 2003, p.18); thus, (positioning social inclusion as a primary goal and outcome of Unified Sports will help school personnel recognize its inherent value, not just as a recreational activity but as a true intervention to promote a more accepting, tolerant, and welcoming school climate (as is the case in Project UNIFY).)

(Second, just as SO should highlight the value of Unified Sports' as a catalyst for social inclusion to the educational community, SO can also look to the field of education for constructive lessons about how to promote camaraderie among teammates with and without disabilities.) True integration does not simply come about because children with and without disabilities have been brought together in the classroom (or on the playing field); rather, decades of experience have taught that successful inclusive programming requires great care and organization. In their historical overview of attitude change in the school context, Siperstein, Norins, and Mohler (2006), advocated that attitudes can change but that, "...well-planned and structured contact [between children with and without intellectual disabilities] is critical." (This is particularly relevant as the results of this study suggest that positive interactions among athletes and partners were maximized, and partner dominance minimized, when coaches focused on team cohesion. In fact, the Unified Sports Handbook states that "on any team, team spirit and player cohesion are critical parts of team success.) Positive interactions between players may not always happen on

their own. (It is the coach's job to promote these interactions" (Special Olympics, 2003, p.14). By promoting camaraderie among Unified Sports teammates through carefully planned activities and sports drills, coaches can facilitate positive interactions on the playing field that will translate into other contexts as well.)

(Third, it is suggested that great care and consideration is taken when choosing partners.) The results of this study suggest that selecting partners who have more positive attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, and who are motivated by altruism, may enhance the experiences of all teammates. Among teams in this study, the composition of Unified teams varied greatly and these differences had a profound impact on the quality of athlete/partner interactions, including incidences of partner dominance, and thus, ultimately on the Unified Sports experience for all involved. While we acknowledge that team composition may be driven by multiple factors, including coaches' differing interpretations of Unified Sports or the differences in the student populations of schools, it is clear that for a Unified Sports team to be successful, team composition is a vital consideration. The careful selection of teammates is currently emphasized in the Unified Sports Handbook, which states that athletes and partners should be matched as closely as possible with regards to ability and age. (With regard to athlete selection specifically, the Handbook states that, "Unified Sports is a program suited for higher-ability athletes" (Special Olympics, 2003, p.15). However, as inclusive educational practices for ALL students of ALL ability levels increasingly becomes the norm in public education, and as Project UNIFY continues to reach more schools across the US, offering Unified Sports only to "higher-ability" athletes may become increasingly challenging. Therefore the careful and purposeful selection of partners becomes even more important.)

Lastly, because coaches play a key role, including assembling the team, structuring practices, motivating players, fostering positive social interactions among teammates, and communicating with school administrators, teachers, parents, and SO regional staff, they need to be chosen carefully and trained appropriately. In fact, the Unified Sports Handbook states that, "the most important person to the success of a Unified Sports team is the coach" (Special Olympics, 2003, p.9). The Handbook also goes on to suggest that coaches should meet national standards for athletic coaches and provides a wealth of valuable tips and recommendations for coaches.

(However only half of the coaches observed in this study had any prior coaching experience, and most received only minimal training from SO. Adopting a standardized, systematic approach to the recruitment and training of Unified Sports coaches would help further ensure the positive experiences of athletes and partners.)

In conclusion, the results of this study indicate that school-based Unified Sports programming has the potential to provide positive social experiences and valuable benefits to elementary school children with and without disabilities. Findings also indicate, however, that the quality of this programming can vary across a number of dimensions. Although some variability is inherent and expected in any nationally implemented program, it is important to understand how this variability can impact the quality of the experience. Therefore, the results of this study can begin to guide SO as they work to ensure the consistent fulfillment of high-quality programming across the country and around the globe that will maximize the opportunity for athletes and partners to benefit from their Unified Sports experience.