

Does an Awareness Program Change Attitudes towards Inclusion of Children with Disabilities in Summer Camps?

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ABSTRACT

Awareness programs are key factors in the development of positive attitudes toward inclusion of children with disabilities in school settings, however there are not any published research on the effect of similar programs in camp settings. The purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of a three-week disability awareness program on attitudes of children without disabilities toward the inclusion of peers with disabilities in a summer camp. Four hundred sixty one campers without disabilities (M = 13.24 years old, SD = .97) attending a typical summer camp participated in the study. Participants were divided into a control (n = 225, M = 13.45 years old, SD = .90) and an experimental group (n = 236, M = 13.03 years old, SD = .94). The control group followed the typical camp's program, while the experimental group attended a disability awareness program alongside to the typical program. The disability awareness program was based on the principles and

the methodology of the "Paralympic School Day" (PSD) and the "So Get into It" program. Each participant completed a questionnaire based on Theory of Planned Behavior which was designed to measure attitudes toward inclusion of peers with disabilities in a summer camp, intention, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms. The results of a 2 X 2 ANOVA (control-experimental, pre-post measure) revealed statistical significant differences favoring the experimental group on attitudes, intention, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms after the awareness program ($p < .05$). These findings indicate that participation in an awareness program can have a positive influence on children's attitudes towards the inclusion of children with disabilities in summer camps. Similar programs are recommended to be implemented in other recreational and educational settings in order to develop positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

Key Words

Inclusion, Disabilities, Attitudes, Summer camps, Awareness program

INTRODUCTION

Attitudes involve cognitive, behavioral and affective components and they are the key to change behaviors toward people who are different. According to Allport (1935) attitudes may arise even from a single remarkable experience. The vast majority of research regarding changing attitudes of children without disabilities toward the inclusion of peers with disabilities has been conducted in school settings (Connor and Ferri, 2007; Hutzler and Lewi, 2008; Obrusnikova et al., 2010). However, it seems that inclusion in a formal and mandatory setting where specific goals (i.e., academic achievement) should be achieved may not always be effective in developing positive attitudes (Ellery and Rauschenbach, 2000; Korologou et al., in press).

Past research indicated that a well-organized multifarious disability awareness programs can influence children's attitudes positively (Liu et al., 2010; Panagiotou et al., 2008; Rillotta and Nettelbeck, 2007; Xafopoulos et al., 2009) whereas other does not support the positive effect of an awareness programs in school setting (e.g., Wilhite et al., 1997). Perhaps a less competitive recreational environment such as summer camps, would offer a more appropriate setting to influence attitudes toward disabilities. In these settings children get the chance to participate in activities and games with peers on a daily basis, foster inclusion and develop close relationships (Thurber et al., 2007). However, there is no past evidence investigating the effect of awareness programs in camp settings. Thus, the purpose of the present study was to examine the impact of a three-week awareness program on attitudes of children without disabilities toward the inclusion of peers with disability in a typical summer camp.

METHODS

Sample: Four hundred sixty one campers without disabilities ($M_{age} = 13.24$ years, $SD = .97$), from a typical summer camp in Northern Greece participated in the study. The campers divided into two groups, a control ($n = 225$, $M_{age} = 13.45$

years, $SD = .90$) attending the typical program of the summer camp and an experimental group ($n = 236$, $M_{age} = 13.03$ years, $SD = .94$) attending a disability awareness program alongside to the typical program.

Questionnaire: Each participant completed a questionnaire based on Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB), which was designed to measure attitudes toward inclusion of peers with disabilities in a summer camp (Ajzen, 2002). The questionnaire included six questions about attitudes toward inclusion of peers with disabilities, three about intention, four about perceived behavioral control and three about subjective norms. Participants responded on a 7-point Likert-scale and high scores indicated more positive attitudes. Cronbach's alpha coefficient of reliability was within accepted values ($\alpha = .77 - .82$).

Awareness program: The disability awareness program structured on principles and activities of the "Paralympic School Day" (IPC, 2006) and the "So Get into It" (<https://getintoit.specialolympics.org>). Both programs aiming in increasing awareness and providing information about individuals with disabilities, information about the Paralympic and Special Olympic Games, awareness on the rights of independence and equal participation, and experience of being different in an enjoyable and playful environment. The experimental group was divided into 10 subgroups of approximately 22 children/per group. Each subgroup participated in a series of Paralympic and Special Olympic sports, accessibility games, dancing, drawing etc. Each activity lasted 35 minutes within a total duration of three hours daily in the morning and three hours in the evening for 20 days.

Procedures: Upon the arrival of the campers, the pre-intervention measurement of attitudes was held to all participants. In the next 20 days the activities of the program were implemented to the experimental group whereas the control group attended the typical activities of the camp. The post-intervention measurement took place during the last day of the camp.

Data Analysis: A 2 X 2 repeated measure analysis of variance was used to examine the effects of the awareness program on children's attitudes (control-experimental, pre-post measure).

RESULTS

Participants reported positive attitudes towards children with disabilities. Means and standard deviation of the study's variables are presented in Table 1.

Repeated measures analysis of variance results revealed a significant "group" by "time" interaction on attitudes' dimension ($F_{(1,459)} = 325.57, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .42$), on intention ($F_{(1,459)} = 192.39, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .29$), on perceived behavioral control dimension ($F_{(1,459)} = 303.77, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .40$) and on subjective norms ($F_{(1,459)} = 190.28, p < .001, \text{partial } \eta^2 = .29$). Participants in the experimental group reported an increase of all examined variables (attitudes, intention, perceived behavioral control, subjective norms) in

Table 1. Means and standard deviations of the variables in pre and post-test measurements

	Groups	Pre-test		Post-test	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Attitudes	Control	4.83	1.06	4.85	1.06
	Experimental	4.53	1.12	6.18	.73
Intention	Control	5.02	1.37	4.91	1.34
	Experimental	4.76	1.21	6.31	.70
PBC	Control	4.59	1.19	4.60	1.12
	Experimental	4.36	1.17	6.12	.70
Subjective norms	Control	5.26	1.27	5.30	1.23
	Experimental	4.85	1.18	6.40	.58

Note: PBC=Perceived Behavioural Control

the post-test compared to the pre-test. On the other hand, control scores on attitudes, intention, perceived behavioral control and subjective norms did not significantly changed from pre to post-test.

DISCUSSION

The present study investigated the effect of an awareness program in a recreational setting on the attitudes towards children with disability. The results of the analysis supported the hypothesis about the positive effect of the awareness program on the attitudes towards the inclusion of peers with disability in a summer camp. Similarly to past research (Magouritsa et al., 2005; Siperstein et al., 2009) the findings of the present study indicate that awareness programs can be effective in recreation settings. In

settings such as summer camps, children have the opportunity to participate in diverse activities, such as physical activities and games, art and literature, in a loose environment that promotes social interaction and close interpersonal relationships (Thurber et al., 2007). Although, research in school setting indicate a decrease in attitudes, the present study support the fact that unlike school, where emphasis is placed in the attainment of academic goals (Obrusnikova, et al., 2010; Korologou et al., in press), summer camps provide a unique experience emphasizing less-competitive activities and having fun. Overall, the findings of the present study indicated that a disability awareness program implemented in a recreational setting increase attitudes towards peers with disabilities. Similar programs are recommended to be implemented

in other recreational and educational settings in order to develop positive attitudes towards individuals with disabilities.

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