Transforming Disability to Opportunity:
A Comprehensive Analysis of the Health
and Opportunities of Youth with Disabilities

Ty Bever, Nana Danso, Ilana Hayutin, Will Holtzmann, and Rosie Whyte

October 29, 2017

Pioneer Leadership Program: Leading Community Change
University of Denver

Evidence Based Issue Summary
In Colorado, 41,466 children between the ages of one and seventeen reported living with some form of physical or cognitive disability (Data Access and Dissemination Systems, 2010). There are only about twenty schools in the Denver municipal area that offer comprehensive programs in special education (Curtin et al, 2016). The number of organizations that focus on personal development and extracurricular activities for this population are even more limited. Children with disabilities are suffering from the psychological consequences of a lack of access to these necessary resources. It is the public’s responsibility to support youth with disabilities and make empowerment opportunities more available so that all members of the community can thrive.

The developmental setbacks that youth with disabilities face is not a problem isolated to those directly affected by it, but rather the community as a whole. As Peter Block (2009) emphasizes in *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, the relationships between people are a powerful thing. In order to unite networks and build social fabric, people must be accountable not only for themselves but for one other (Block, 2009). However, before this can be achieved, a shift in thinking must occur. This shift starts with the realization that fostering a sense of connectedness between established systems such as business, government, and education is essential for community transformation. The transformation starts at the local level; “the small group is the unit of transformation” (Block, 2009, p. 33). The intimacy of small groups creates belonging and trust, which are frameworks for sustainable change. Since community members have the obligation to be accountable for one another, they must ensure that bonding occurs between all individuals, including those with disabilities. This can be accomplished by framing ideas, building social capital, and mobilizing resources (Krile, 2006). It starts with helping others
recognize and define the issue, maintaining relationships, and engaging others to take action and achieve the desired outcome (Krile, 2006).

These processes must be put in place because young people with disabilities are often in a cycle of helplessness due to limited access to structures for progress. Having a severe disability can limit one’s sense of autonomy, and overwhelming dependence decreases employment opportunities, social relationships, and postsecondary education (Shrogen & Shaw, 2016). These children might also perceive themselves as a financial or social burden to their family from increased costs of living due to their disability. On top of this stress from the home, students face even more barriers and anxieties at school. They are often more excluded from their peers because of their disability. This stigmatization hinders children’s academic and social development (Logan et al. 2016). Children with a physical or mental disability also participate less in extracurricular and social activities which further perpetuates the social gap between them and the nondisabled population. Stratification results in a lack of social mobility or fluid movement between social groups (Logan et al. 2016). Many children with disabilities struggle with establishing themselves into a group of friends, and a lack of intimate relationships with peers is correlated with low physical activity (Logan et al. 2016).

Because of risk factors like social isolation and limited involvement in activities, children with disabilities have a predisposition for developing chronic anxiety and depression (Witt, Kasper, & Riley, 2003). Coping strategies can combat mental illness and promote psychological empowerment. Unfortunately, only four in ten children with disabilities receive treatment for anxiety and depression (Witt et al., 2003). Instead of utilizing effective coping strategies, these
children employ defensive coping mechanisms such as avoidance of social situations. This disrupts social development and can initiate an unhealthy mental state (Kurtek, 2016).

The root of these issues may be traced to the mentality of division and marginalization of difference in society. Instead of focusing on people’s gifts, people label others by their deficiencies (Block, 2009, p. 60). Naming a person “disabled” reduces them to an artifact of study rather than an authentic human being. Slee and Cook (1993) pinpointed this phenomena about twenty years ago and deducted, “This superficial treatment of disability is played out at all levels of society across all institutions with profound consequences for people, young and old, with perceived disabilities.” Though combating stigmatization is part of the public agenda today, it is still not a priority. Children deal with the social castigation that comes with labeling constantly and it adversely affects their relationships. As previously mentioned, poor relationships within a child’s microsystem are correlated with low self-esteem, depression, social anxiety, and maladjustment (Pham, Y.K, & Murray, C., 2016). When these psychological setbacks are coupled with the lack of access to mentors, these students are set up for academic failure. If children were not singled out and categorized based on their ascribed statuses, their developmental outcomes would be drastically different.

While children with disabilities should not be alienated from society based on their condition, they do have specific learning and social needs that differ from the general population. Consequently, there has been a lot of debate surrounding the effectiveness of placing children with special needs into individualized programs or integrating them into the traditional classroom. Students who do not conform to traditional learning standards may thrive in schools with alternative programming, like the Denver Academy and the REACH school. These
institutions tailor learning to each student’s personal needs and abilities which facilitates cognitive and interpersonal growth (Welcome to Denver Academy, n.d.). At the same time, transferring schools is a deliberate act of distancing adolescents from the mainstream population, which could exacerbate feelings of “otherness” (Pham & Murray, 2016; Slee & Cook, 1993). Partially integrating children into the classroom while also providing tertiary support could solve this problem of “othering,” but even partial integration exposes these children to high levels of stress (Kurtek, 2016). The classroom environment can initiate a positive feedback loop between anxiety and lack of comprehension of material. When students are not pre-armed with coping strategies, the distress from integration can have debilitating effects on their academic achievement (Kurtek, 2016). Schools need to find ways to be more flexible and inclusive so they can respond to the needs of all of their students, but for now, moving children to alternative schools for a better education seems to be the best option.

Schooling is a major point of discussion with this population, but people tend to overlook the importance of leisure activities and play in child development. Consistent participation in sports and cultural activities enhances a young child’s quality of life. It improves social interaction, promotes the formation of friendships, fosters learning and executive functioning, encourages self-expression, and challenges their existing identities (Melboe & Yttherhus, 2017). Children with disabilities find solace in therapeutic recreation because it allows them to become more than their disability. Society sees them as artists and athletes rather than disabled persons (Melbow & Yttherhus, 2017; Access Gallery, n.d.; Special Olympics Colorado, n.d.). Unfortunately, children with disabilities have limited access to many forms of therapeutic play. Youth with intellectual disabilities, specifically, want to participate in the same leisure activities
as non-disabled youth, but our society marginalizes and blocks them from participation (Melbow & Yttherhus, 2017; Slee & Cook, 1993). Despite Article 30 of the United Nations declaration of rights of persons with disabilities, organizations generally tailor to the “normate” and systematically exclude anyone that doesn’t fall into that slim category. Some barriers for accommodation may include expenses, resources, and transportation, but these issues can easily be resolved with financial solutions (Melbow & Yttherhus, 2017). The real challenge will be changing community attitudes to be more empathetic and accepting of difference.

In order to encourage meaningful participation of youth with disabilities, communities are exploring the benefits of leisure activities (Willis et al., 2017). Elements that contribute to positive therapeutic experiences include one-on-one personal interaction and activities with an environmental focus (Willis et al., 2017). These two elements among others allow for children to enjoy themselves in an inclusive environment where they can create genuine relationships with role models and friends (Willis et al., 2017). Incorporating these factors into programming will lead to more purposeful engagement.

The positive effects of mentoring are also being researched. Curtin et al (2016) investigated how mentoring programs with trained college-age volunteers helped increase confidence and adaptability in teens with Autism or Aspergers. Working with peer mentors helped alleviate symptoms of social anxiety and significantly increased the children’s “self-esteem and quality of life” (Curtin et al., 2016). Having these relationships also proved beneficial in easing the transition from adolescence to adulthood for individuals with disabilities. When mentorship opportunities are coupled with participation in outdoor activities and sports, it is a recipe for success (Shapiro et al., 2016; Curtin et al., 2016).
Organizations in Denver are spearheading this shift toward meaningful participation in activities to lessen the load of psychological baggage that comes with having a disability. Special Olympics of Colorado and Outdoor Buddies aim to improve the lives of disabled youth through exercise and outdoor immersion. Special Olympics provides opportunities for athletes to train and compete in 22 different sports including swimming, running, triathlon, soccer, and tennis (Special Olympics Colorado, n.d.; S. Aden, personal communication, October 27, 2017). By participating in these programs, these young adults develop leadership skills and healthy habits that they carry into the rest of their lives. Eighty-four percent of students involved in Special Olympics report that the program is *life-changing* (Special Olympics Colorado, n.d.). According to the vice president, Nick Filler, participants of Outdoor Buddies have a similar empowering and rewarding experience (N. Filler, personal communication, October 20, 2017). He illustrated how each athlete has lived a different story and comes with a specific set of unique challenges, but understanding and overcoming those challenges is what makes it all the more special (N. Filler, personal communication, October 20, 2017).

Along with exercise therapy, art therapy has been a popular avenue for organizations dedicated to improving the lives of individuals with disabilities. The Access Gallery in Denver is an “inclusive nonprofit organization that engages the community by opening doors to creative, educational and economical opportunities for people with disabilities to access, experience and benefit from the arts” (Access Gallery, n.d.). During an interview with Cris Ciani, the program director at the gallery, we experienced the uplifting effects of art first-hand. Sharing and selling personal creations boosts the morale of individuals with mental disabilities. Cris hires young artists which gives them the opportunity to learn economic independence during their transition
from high school to adult life (C. Ciani, personal communication, October 20, 2017). Access Gallery also offers weekly workshops and classes for students in the local school district. Their legacy of inclusivity is catalyzing a change in therapeutic practices all over Colorado.

Highpointe incorporates a plethora of therapeutic elements into an extended daily program for young adults with severe disabilities. Their curriculum focuses on activities that improve basic living skills and “guides each participant to gain the ability to be flexible and prepared to interact in a fast-moving and complex community” (Highpointe Academy, n.d.). According to Lisa Mark, a former employee at the academy and a mother/caregiver of an autistic, non-verbal young woman, the comprehensive program has the potential to do wonders. She expressed concern about the current management and high overturn of staff as the inconsistency was agitating her daughter and causing her to relapse into some of her aggressive behaviors. Lisa pulled her daughter out of Highpointe after ten years and is now following a strict regimen of art and exercise therapy at home (L. Mark, personal communication, October 26, 2017). She encouraged our team to bolster the program with innovative practices and bring an influx of committed volunteers, because she would then feel comfortable with returning to the academy.

Highpointe could benefit from incorporating elements of programs like Whole Child and the REACH school into their curriculum. Denver Public Schools use Whole Child to ensure that their students with disabilities are “healthy, supported, engaged, challenged, safe, and socially and emotionally intelligent” (Denver Public Schools, n.d.). The defining factor of these programs is the individualization of learning. They cater to the specific needs of each child rather than generalizing the needs of a group based on the diagnostic tendencies of their disability.
There are a myriad of leaders in the Denver area tirelessly working to find new ways to empower youth with disabilities. From parents to school institutions to extracurricular organizations, the community is starting to unite and support “our kids” (Putnam, 1995), but we still have a long way to go. Providing this population with the opportunity and guidance they need requires an extraordinary level of commitment, but the reward of seeing a child thrive is priceless. Only by investing in these children will we reach a level of cohesivity in our community that is transformational for all of its members.
Works Cited


50900&type=hitlist&num=5

participation in children and youth athletes with physical disabilities: A parent and athlete
doi:10.1016/j.dhjo.2015.11.007

Psychological Empowerment in Predicting Outcomes for Youth With Disabilities.


http://www.specialolympicsco.org

https://www.denveracademy.org/page/about-us/welcome-to-denver-academy

Elements contributing to meaningful participation for children and youth with
doi:10.1080/09638288.2016.1207716

Worsnop, R. L. (1996, December 20). Implementing the disabilities act. CQ Researcher, 6,