

An Appreciative Inquiry into the Circle of Friends Program: The Benefits of Social Inclusion

of Students with Disabilities

Raymond Calabrese

The Ohio State University

Jean Patterson
Fuchang Liu
Sherry Goodvin
Crystal Hummel
Erica Nance

Wichita State University

Abstract

Social inclusion of students with disabilities into the school system is a primary goal for many educators as well as advocates for this population. One program that seeks to increase levels of social inclusion for students with disabilities is the Circle of Friends Program (COFP). Its purpose is to widen the social network of students with disabilities by linking them to the social network of general education students. A qualitative case study research design using an appreciative inquiry theoretical research perspective examined the efficacy of the COFP by focusing on the positive core experiences of the program's stakeholders—sponsors, mentors, and parents of children with disabilities and identifying benefits provided by the COFP to program participants. The unit of analysis included ten sponsors, eight mentors, and ten parents of children with disabilities who represented six schools within four school districts (one urban and three suburban) in a Midwestern state. There were four findings: (a) a reduction in the level of alienation among parents of children with disabilities; (b) participants, regardless of their COFP role, felt involvement was a transformative experience; (c) COFP provided ecological conditions for the social inclusion of students with disabilities; and (d) additional resources for the COFP may increase its sphere of influence. These findings indicated that a primary benefit of the COFP is to reframe the traditional stereotypes and myths regarding students with disabilities.

An Appreciative Inquiry into the Circle of Friends Program: The Benefits of Social Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

This study describes a research partnership among university, state legislature, and public schools to examine benefits of social inclusion of students with disabilities assisted by the Circle of Friends Program (COFP). School-university research partnerships are often viewed as effective ways to improve services to students who receive services from special education (Ainscow, Booth, & Dyson, 2004).

Nearly 14% of all students in the United States receive some form of special education assistance in accordance with federal legislation, most recently reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)(Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, 2004). Students who qualify to receive services under IDEIA are frequently referred to as *students with disabilities*. Of these students, African American and Hispanic students are more likely than other groups to be classified as having a disability (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2007; Utley, Kozleski, Smith, & Draper, 2002). In effect, African American students constitute approximately 16% of the school aged population in urban schools, yet they represent more than 30% of the special education population (A. Smith & Kozleski, 2005).

Substantial effort appears to be placed by educators on increasing the achievement levels of students with disabilities as a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The achievement scores of students classified in special education are part of the overall assessment of a school's performance indicating whether the school met adequate yearly progress (AYP). In effect, there is greater emphasis on inclusion, based on assisting students with disabilities to meet the achievement goals specified in NCLB. There is a growing body

of scholarly work related to the academic benefits resulting from inclusion of students with disabilities into the general (regular) education classroom. There also appears to be limited but emerging empirical research on the benefits of promoting a positive social inclusion experience for students with disabilities with their general education peers (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001; Lindsay, 2007). Examples of research on social inclusion describe those who are pro active in facilitating the inclusion process (Henderson, 2006); examine the efficacy of mentoring as a helpful method of supporting social inclusion (Newburn & Shiner, 2006); and, describe the use parental social networks to improve their children's special education services for children (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). We sought to extend these and similar studies by continuing to focus on the benefits of social inclusion of students with disabilities.

Purpose of Study

One program that focuses on broadening the social inclusion of students with disabilities by expanding the circles of their social relationships is the Circle of Friends Program (COFP). The intent of the COFP is to help students with disabilities develop social relationships with general education students within the school context (McCurdy, 2005). An independent research team comprised of university faculty and school practitioners was asked by a Midwestern state legislator to initiate research into the efficacy of the COFP for a presentation to the state legislature. The purpose of our research was to describe the perspectives of the sponsors, peer mentors, and parents of students with disabilities in the COFP based on their level of participation in the program in a dynamic urban/suburban context in a Midwestern state where the majority of the population of the urban school district is now a minority student population.

Literature Review

The COFP increases the cultural proficiency of a school's organization. The increase in cultural proficiency among administrators, teachers, and general education students creates an environment where students with disabilities feel a part of the normal activities of school life (American Psychological Association, May 2003). Moreover, the increase in cultural proficiency causes stakeholders to reflect and assess their response to students with disabilities, improve the dynamics of relationships between general education students with disabilities, provide new and accurate knowledge regarding students with disabilities, and increase support for improved service delivery to students with disabilities (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989; University of Michigan Health System, 2007).

The COFP seeks to provide effective family support that integrates planned services with informal and differentiated levels of support, such as extended family, friends, neighbors, and faith communities. These asset-driven supports facilitate the process of how each family meets their unique needs (Bronheim, Goode, & Jones, Spring 2006).

The COFP is considered an extrinsic strategy that encourages the creation of constructive group relationships. The goal of the COFP is to provide a pathway for students with disabilities to enter into and become accepted into the school's social networks (Schlein, Green, & Stone, 1999). Although there has been limited research related to the COFP, some suggest that the COFP has a positive effect on the social acceptance of students with disabilities and elevates their sense of self worth (Frederickson & Turner, 2003). The COFP is also a vehicle that generates respect for students with disabilities from the general education population and allows them to have a better school social experience.

The COFP's work also enhances parents' efforts to seek facilitation opportunities for

their child's inclusion into the school social experience. A primary facilitation opportunity for social inclusion is through COFP-sponsored (Turnbull, Pereira, & Blue-Banning, 1999). Additionally, the application of using peer networks of circles of friends suggests that there are benefits for students with disabilities when social interactions are planned and sustained. It has been applied at multiple school levels and has had success in helping students with disabilities create a social network (Miller, Cooke, Test, & White, 2003).

In addition to augmenting social-inclusion opportunities, available research on the COFP indicates some promising findings that extend beyond social inclusion of students with disabilities. These findings suggest that students with disabilities who participate in COFP activities increase their communication skills (Frederickson & Turner, 2003; Kalyva & Avramidis, 2005). The research team did not find evidence of empirical research that sought to identify the effect of the COFP on its sponsors, former buddies, or the parents of students with disabilities. Our research will address these gaps in the research.

Circle of Friends Program

Circle of Friends programs exist in many communities in the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom. A school sponsor facilitates the COFP. The sponsor is a special education teacher, counselor, or, in some cases, an administrator. The program pairs students with disabilities with buddies who provide social-inclusion opportunities for the students with disabilities. The COFP uses the term *buddy* when referring to a general education student in a peer network (Stanton-Salazar & Urso-Spina, 2005). Buddies are selected through a formal process involving the COFP sponsors, who review applications, interview, screen, and train those selected to be buddies. Buddies assist in the social inclusion of students with disabilities served by the COFP. A primary role of a buddy is to enlarge the

social circle for children with disabilities. This pairing is beneficial for both students with disabilities and buddies: (a) the self-esteem of students with disabilities increases as they learn to better communicate and become a greater part of the school community, and (b) buddies gain self-confidence and learn to accept differences in people (Holtz & Tessman, 2006).

Metaphorically, the COFP creates a widening circle of social relationships for students with disabilities, changing the perceptions of general education students toward students with disabilities. These changes of perceptions come about through the interaction of buddies with students with disabilities and carry over into the larger community. As the recursive process continues, students with disabilities become part of the community and are valued for the gifts that they bring to the community.

Overview of Methodology

We used a qualitative case study framed by an appreciative inquiry (AI) theoretical research perspective to describe the positive core of experiences of the COFP's sponsors and buddies as well as the parents of children served by the COFP who represented six schools and four school districts. The urban school district is the largest school district in this Midwestern state; the remaining three school districts are suburban neighboring districts.

We began our research with two propositions: (a) a firm belief exists that parents of children who are served by the COFP will report a positive core of personal experiences for their children as well as themselves, and (b) sponsors and buddies of the COFP will report a positive impact that the COFP has on stakeholders. Given our propositions, we chose to use an AI line of inquiry that sought to discover the positive core of experiences of sponsors, parents of children with disabilities, and former buddies in the COFP.

The AI theoretical research perspective seeks to discover the best in people, their organizations, and the context in which they live and work (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2003). In effect, AI emphasizes a search for what is good and identifies when an organization is at its best. AI is both a theoretical research perspective and methodology (Bushe, 1998; Calabrese, 2006). AI is widely used as an action research methodology in business, science, and social science domains (Baskett, 1993; Bloom & Archer-Martin, 2002; Egan & Lancaster, 2005; Havens, Wood, & Leeman, 2006). In this case, we used AI as a theoretical research perspective to guide the development of protocols used in each data collection method.

Units of Analysis

The units of analysis in this research were ten sponsors, eight former buddies, and ten parents who represented multiple schools in this greater urban context and who were involved in the COFP. We used purposeful sampling to choose participants to enable us “to learn something and come to understand something about certain select cases without needing to generalize to all such cases” (Patton, 1986, p. 101). Our use of purposeful sampling allowed us to settle on a set of participants that met the boundaries we established for inclusion into our unit of analysis. We formed our boundaries around the case realizing that the quality of the participants’ knowledge in the sample is more important than the size of the sample (Merriam, 2002; Merriam & Simpson, 2000; Patton, 1986). We required sponsors to be involved in the COFP for a minimum of three years and former buddies to be recent (within one-year) high school graduates. We selected only those parents of students with disabilities whose children have been participants in the COFP for at least two years. Our study was limited by time restrictions placed on the request for research by the

Midwestern state legislator for presentation to the state legislature. Consequently, our purposive sample was limited to sponsors, former buddies, and parents of students with disabilities.

Research Questions

Our overarching question asked, what are the benefits that the COFP provides to the participants in the program? From this question, the research team derived three primary research questions:

1. How do school sponsors in the Circle of Friends Program describe the benefits of the COFP?
2. How do parents of children with disabilities in the Circle of Friends Program describe the benefits of the COFP?
3. How do former buddies of students with disabilities in the Circle of Friends Program describe the benefits of the COFP?

Methods

Three specific methods were used to collect data: focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and an online survey. One focus group was comprised of eight parents of children with disabilities in the COFP. The other focus group was comprised of eight COFP sponsors. The semi-structured interviews included two parents and two sponsors in the COFP. An online survey was sent to eight former COFP buddies (seven surveys were completed). We also maintained rich and detailed field notes, researcher observations, and digital recordings of the focus groups and semi-structured interviews.

Data Analysis

For the purposes of this study, we determined the quality of our data gathering

process by ensuring the creditability, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of our data. Each researcher used member checking during the semi-structured interviews as well as in the focus groups. We also submitted a summary of findings to participants for their review. We triangulated our data by collecting it from multiple sources: parents, former buddies, and sponsors; and, through the use of multiple methods (Patton, 2002). We maintained a rich description of the data collection process including our observations, field notes, and recordings. We applied protocols that are consistent with the application of an AI theoretical research perspective and with each researcher to minimize errors and bias. Moreover, we analyzed our data by using the text analysis software packages CATPAC and Atlas.ti (Calabrese et al., 2007; Scott, 2005). These software packages facilitated our open and axial coding procedures, content analysis, and pattern matching (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Four main findings emerged from the data analysis:

1. Participation in the Circle of Friends Program reduced the level of alienation felt by parents of children with disabilities (more powerful, less isolated).
2. Participation in the Circle of Friends Program was transformative.
3. Additional financial, human, and time resources are crucial to sustain the Circle of Friends Program.
4. Ecological conditions are created for inclusion into the school's social experience for students with disabilities.

Each finding helps to explain how the COFP reframes traditional stereotypes and myths regarding students with disabilities. We now explore the findings and illustrate them with descriptions provided by the study's participants.

Participation in the Circle of Friends Program Reduces the Level of Alienation

One of the broad findings that emerged from the data was that participation in the COFP reduced the level of alienation among participants, especially parents. The concept of alienation is used in its social sense, where it represents an estrangement from society and is often evidenced in the forms of powerlessness, isolation, and normlessness (Calabrese & Adams, 1990). Moreover, alienation represents a sense of separation within specific contexts such as work, school, church, or one's neighborhood. The sense of separation is often manifested within the person as a response to that person's interaction with his/her context (Calabrese, 1990). The sense of alienation felt by parents prior to their experience with the COFP was manifested as a personal reaction to their child's disability or a perception of a non-responsive school organization. In this study, it was manifested primarily as a form of powerlessness or isolation.

One parent spoke of her sense of alienation. She said, "I was starting to have a little pity party. I see high school kids out there and they [do not remain] home with their moms. So, I was starting to feel sorry for myself and my son." Another parent said, "Being the parent of a child with a disability is a lonely endeavor." Personal perceptions were often the result of parents' past experiences or their observations of how they believed children with disabilities were treated at school. As a result, their images of what might happen to their child were obscured by fear. One parent said:

I thought if I sent him to school, it would be a horrible experience. There are physical

characteristics with Down syndrome. You can spot them right off the bat. I thought school would be horrible and that he would be singled out and have the most miserable time of his entire life. I thought I would keep him home with me for his entire life.

The parents of children with disabilities often lacked previous experience with children with disabilities within their family or at school. Many were taught to believe that children with disabilities were to be avoided. Now that they had a child with disabilities, they believed other people held a similar belief. One parent spoke of her school experiences. These experiences shaped her image of her child's future:

When I was a student in school, we were separated from the special education kids.

We always thought that we needed to stay away from them because something was wrong with them. You didn't eat in the same room with them. They really kept you separated.

In many ways, the parents' personal alienation was a manifestation of their experience at school. They sent their child to school while harboring negative expectations and were not surprised when they often saw them fulfilled. As a result, they developed a heightened sense of alienation in relationship to the school setting. For many parents, it was a reaction to the way they believed their child was treated or in the way the school organization reacted to them.

Parents spoke freely of how they felt some schools in a large urban district were uninviting and made their child's school experience almost intolerable. One parent said, "In one school, the special education classrooms were down here, and the rest of the classrooms were all the way down there (referring to the school's basement level). It appeared like a

little jail or something.” In many cases, the experiences were personally painful. Some parents reported that their children were bullied and teased. In other situations, parents perceived their children as tolerated and yet, set apart—not allowed to enter into the normal social setting experienced by general education students. One parent said, “Some of the schools without the COFP were friendly and cordial, but that’s all. They didn’t get involved. They didn’t get our kids involved.”

Sponsors also spoke of the alienating environment within schools without the COFP. A sponsor asserted, “When you talk to some of our students with disabilities, what they have had to experience up to this point has been horrible—bullying, teasing, and being left out.”

In contrast to previous alienating experiences, the COFP provided a new vision for parents of children with disabilities. Parents, who once expressed a lack of hope and a forfeiting of dreams, now experienced the liberating power of their association with the COFP. For these parents, the COFP provided a social support network that reduced their sense of powerlessness. The COFP also provided a path for their children’s integration into the mainstream of school life, thus ending a sense of isolation that they felt their children experienced. One parent said, “What’s cool is that my son is a part of COFP, and I have met all these people. We take him to the activities, and then we all go do something.” Since alienation, in its social sense, represents an estrangement from society, it is often evidenced in the form of isolation. These parents believed that their children’s sense of isolation was lessened by engaging with buddies who expanded their children’s social circle. A sponsor supported the parents’ view:

When the buddies come in, it’s like a whole different world for the students with disabilities. Buddies are outgoing. They dance and sing. It’s really cool. They

encourage the kids. A lot of the buddies feel like the kids are their friends. The [general] education students are constantly saying hi and stopping to talk to them in the halls.

The sponsors also witnessed the transformational effect on parents and their children. Alienation was replaced with hope. A sponsor said:

Probably the most exciting time for me is watching the reaction of the parents.

Parents see their kids, who have never had many friends or participated in a whole lot of activities, now involved with [general] education kids. Their kids are going to different activities in which they normally did not participate.

The sponsors were aware that the COFP helped to reduce the sense of powerlessness felt by parents of children with disabilities who were undergoing significant personal trials at home. A sponsor spoke about a parent who was suffering from cancer. The sponsor said:

The COFP even supported the mom in the summer time when he wasn't at school with all of his buddies. They would pick him up and do activities with him so that it allowed some time off for his mom to rest and recover from the chemo treatments. It was an exciting time for him. Without that support system being in place, it wouldn't have happened that way. That is the most important part of COFP for me.

A parent with cancer was undergoing chemotherapy. She spoke passionately about the positive difference the COFP made in her family's life:

I really value the buddies in COFP. They have become supporters of me—what I have been going through with the cancer and everything. The buddies have been amazing. They always ask how I am doing. My concern is my son and how he is going to deal with my situation. He has Down syndrome. It is hard for any kid to see

their parent go through cancer, let alone one who doesn't have the mental capacity to really understand the situation. The buddies come to my home and take him on outings so he could be away from the house and not watch me be sick.

Some level of alienation may still exist for many of these parents; yet, it appeared that the COFP reduced the parental sense of powerlessness and isolation. The COFP also reduced the sense of powerlessness felt by sponsors. Many sponsors associated with the program felt empowered, and their empowerment was enhanced because they witnessed a transformation in their school.

Participation in the Circle of Friends Program was Transformative

Participants described their involvement in the COFP as a transformative experience. Sponsors and buddies felt a renewed sense of purpose when they placed the interests of others before self interests. The COFP was also transformative in altering the underlying assumptions and transforming behaviors of sponsors and buddies toward students with disabilities. Sponsors and buddies viewed their roles in the COFP as a transformative experience that in many instances contributed to their belief that participation in the COFP was a life-changing experience.

Buddies realized the important role that students with disabilities played in their lives. They believed that as a result of their participation in the COFP, they became more accepting of others and acted with a higher degree of compassion. One buddy commented, "I felt the best about my work when I realized there was more to life than succeeding. Seeing my friend being more confident in the hallway and talking to my friends during lunch were highlights for me." Another buddy shared a sense of joy that was a result of her participation in the COFP, "I've seen it change people's attitudes. I've seen it change people's lives. It has

definitely changed mine. It taught me to love people in a whole new way.” A sponsor agreed with this assessment. She stated, “When buddies see a student with disabilities, they act the exact same way. They spread that feeling wherever they go. It is not just with their group. The COFP changes them.”

Parents of children with disabilities also saw the transformation that occurred among the buddies. As they witnessed this transformation, they saw buddies responding in ways that were beneficial to the child with disabilities as well as the buddy. One parent put it this way, “Buddies don’t care what the students with disabilities look like or how their physical appearance may be different. They totally accept them.” Another parent said, “They [buddies] don’t think they are doing anything special. They think that’s the way you should act. They don’t see themselves as superheroes. They are just doing what they think they should be doing.”

The buddies saw themselves as playing a meaningful role in the lives of students with disabilities. One buddy reported that she was most excited “when I have the opportunity to perform with a girl with disabilities who loves to sing—just like me.” Another buddy said, “There is a boy in the COFP who was in a wheelchair. He was very picky about who he talked to. I always talked to him.” This buddy’s experience was similar to that of another buddy, who shared, “Even if they can't communicate back to me, they will listen.” Buddies mentioned that they gained an understanding of people with disabilities. One said, “[I am] connecting with people who have souls just like me.” The effect on the buddies was noticed by sponsors. One sponsor said, “The buddies treat them as they would any of their other friends. It makes such a significant impact on our students’ lives.”

Participating in the COFP helped buddies to rethink the ultimate direction of their

lives. Some now consider choosing a career in special education based on their involvement in the COFP. A sponsor stated, “I have a lot of buddies who are beginning to think about education as a career . . . several buddies have gone into the special education field because of their experience in the COFP.” The consideration of moving toward a service-driven career may have its source of inspiration in the relationship formed between the buddy and the student with disabilities. A sponsor stated, “A lot of [buddies] don’t . . . realize how much they can learn from the students with disabilities. I think that surprises them.” Another sponsor agreed, “They [buddies] get so much inspiration from these kids.”

Sponsors also felt that their participation in the COFP was personally transformative. One sponsor stated, “Maybe we are called to give of ourselves more freely and to take care of individuals around us that need extra love.” Putting others first was referred to by another sponsor who said, “It helped hundreds of students realize life isn’t just about you but other people.” An awareness of one’s impact on another was recognized by another sponsor, “I never felt like I made a difference in someone’s life until I met this young girl. I realized that even if you feel like you’re doing nothing, you are always doing something to impact another person’s life.”

Sponsors believed the COFP influenced community attitudes regarding people with disabilities. They saw community attitudes changing as the concentric circles emanating from the COFP extended further into the community. A sponsor spoke of a broader COFP influence, “We, as a society, are gaining a lot from COFP, they [people with disabilities] are out in the work force and people are accepting them now.” Another sponsor agreed. She said, “Once we reach one person and they meet others, it just grows and grows. They teach other people.”

Parents believed that the COFP had transformative influence on their children's lives that extended beyond the school day. They felt that their child's quality of life was enhanced. They believed that their children were in the process of integrating and assimilating into society. A parent simply stated, "I feel confident my son won't be alone if something happens to my husband and me. He has people who will be there for him. I never felt that way before. I was always worried." Parents also believed that their children gained a heightened sense of respect, a widening circle of friends, and the creation of a support group. A tearful mom with cancer said:

Every time I see them [buddies], they come up to me and give me a hug and ask how I am doing. They prepared food and brought it over. They called and asked if they can pick up my son and take him swimming or to the movies. They are keeping him busy with activities. They are genuinely concerned.

The COFP helped parents view their children as having assets; they stopped focusing on their child's deficits. As a result, the parents felt more confident about their child's future. In effect, their child, once seen by some as a burden, became a source of joy. A parent said, "My daughter doesn't think she is any different—just fitting in." Another parent stated, "My son does this bit where he talks about how his friend [a child with disabilities] is more popular than him. It [his growth] gives you relief and pride. Your heart just explodes."

Sponsors, parents, and buddies believed through their involvement in the COFP that a transformation occurred; the interests of others superseded self interests. They realized the importance of acceptance and inclusion of students with disabilities. Parents believed the COFP had transformative influence on their children's lives.

Additional Financial, Human, and Time Resources are Crucial to Sustain the Continued Viability of the Circle of Friends Program

The COFP is funded by a school district's allocation of space and human resources. The school district's funding is supported through private donations. Even with school district funding support, sponsors believed increased resources would greatly enhance the work of the COFP and enable more children with disabilities to participate. The sponsors thought increased funding would liberate them from time-consuming fundraising activities, particularly sponsors who held leadership positions. A sponsor said, "We spend a lot of time going out and soliciting donations from our community—things like basketball uniforms, cheerleading uniforms, you name it. That is very time consuming." Sponsors all agreed that the time saved could be better spent working directly with the children with disabilities or in organizing COFP-generated activities.

For a program like the COFP, private donations are the major source of funding. Sponsors seek donations in the community where their school is located and often target the same sources. One sponsor stated, "You feel bad going back and asking again and again." One strategy that sponsors use to solicit donations is to inform members of the community of the unique strengths of the COFP. A sponsor said, "Last year, one of our dads thought it [the COFP] was the best thing in the world, and he gave us a huge donation, that helped a ton."

In addition to funding, administrative support and time commitments from sponsors and buddies were important resources. Gaining administrative support was a *quid pro quo* activity. It was more forthcoming when administrators perceived the COFP as functioning efficiently. A sponsor said, "With the way that the COFP has grown and the number of kids we have participating, if we did not have good organization we wouldn't be able to do

anything.” Another sponsor added, “With the COFP being organized and running smoothly, you get more buy in from administration. They [administrators] see what is happening . . . this is valid. It is another circle. The COFP validates itself.”

Sponsors felt that a significant commitment of time was required. In particular, several sponsors mentioned the time commitment associated with producing a COFP variety show. One sponsor stated, “We had a director that stepped forward to volunteer his time [for the variety show], [it took] tons and tons of time.” Another sponsor added, “We spent six months or better planning the variety show. So to see where it came from, and how much of time commitment everyone put into the show, was impressive—just because they believed in the COFP.”

Ecological Conditions are Created for Inclusion into the School’s Social Experience for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities have historically been excluded from the mainstream of education. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Act in 1975 (EHA; P.L. 94-142) required public schools to provide educational services to all children regardless of the extent of their disabilities. These children, however, were almost always placed in separate classrooms and sometimes separate schools. Consequently, special education developed as a parallel system to general education, and little interaction occurred between general education students and students with disabilities. In recent years, education professionals and advocates for students with disabilities have argued the benefits of educating students with all types of disabilities in general education classrooms. Beginning with the reauthorization of EHA in 1997 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, students with disabilities were to receive their special educational services with their general education

peers to the greatest extent possible. Districts and schools have struggled to overcome a history of a separate and segregated special education system, and for various reasons, efforts to include students with disabilities in general education have not always been successful.

In contrast, the COFP is not only a model for successful inclusion of students with disabilities in and outside the classroom but has the potential to serve as a vehicle for facilitating school-wide inclusive educational practices. It was evident that the COFP helps foster a culture of acceptance through encouraging relationships between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. While the COFP introduces buddies into the special education setting, most inclusion efforts begin with placing students with disabilities in the general education classroom. One mother shared her astonishment at walking into her son's special education homeroom:

So many general education students [buddies] had taken the time to come in. [My son] was flipping this football with three other guys. There were some on the computer. Everybody was with everyone. It was just wow; I never believed this would happen for [him] in high school.

Instead of pushing students with disabilities into a general education environment where the teacher and other students might resent their presence, relationships between students with disabilities and buddies are developed naturally over time. A parent described how, through the COFP, her son was no longer excluded from school activities, and relationships that were initially engineered eventually “flowed together into natural relationships.” Another parent simply stressed that the core of the COFP “is not the activities, it is the relationships.” Study participants frequently talked about the program as an opportunity to “make connections” with other human beings, which helped break down

barriers between general education and special education.

Although relationships are formed in the special education environment, the culture of acceptance eventually permeates the school. The COFP begins with a small, safe circle, but the circle expands and grows. As a parent put it, “It’s a circle of friends, but it’s not a closed circle. It’s ever widening. It’s really expanding.” Another parent of a student with disabilities further explained, “The COFP becomes more than just a circle of friends; it becomes everybody else they know.” A buddy called it the “ripple effect,” that is, “Once it became ‘cool’ to hang out with the students with disabilities, then the overall attitude towards these students changed.” Another buddy believed that the COFP “changed the school, and the tolerance of students with disabilities by other students.” A parent further validated that the COFP “really made a difference on the whole school, the staff too.” The program was described as “contagious,” as a teacher sponsor explained:

You walk through the lunch room and see some of the students with disabilities sitting with the [general] education students. Maybe some of them are buddies, and then it will be some of the buddies’ friends, and it just grows from there and everyone starts being a little more accepting.

Thanks to the COFP, students with disabilities are now active participants in high school life, an outcome that initially surprised parents, teachers, and buddies. A sponsor expressed:

Without the COFP, there is a good chance that my students would not attend football games because that is not something their parents are sure they can do. . . . We all just start to say—why can’t they? We start to look at things not as barriers but as challenges, things that we can overcome. We can find ways to include more of our

students.

When sponsors, parents, and buddies can see and experience what is possible, they can create even more opportunities to include students with disabilities in the mainstream of high school, both inside and outside the classroom.

The COFP ripples out into the community, as well, as one parent explained, “It’s gone out to the community because they work at different stores and restaurants. It’s really opened people up . . . to just accepting them as normal kids.” A program sponsor agreed that the COFP has helped change attitudes within the community:

You go anywhere in town and you see them working. People are less afraid of them now; less fearful. . . . I go to Dillon’s or Pizza Hut now and look for the response of people. It is wonderful to watch.

Deep, meaningful, and long-lasting relationships are formed through the COFP that transcend the boundaries of high school. A parent explained that the COFP has “expanded the family.” Several of the COFP buddies are well beyond high school age but are still welcomed at school activities. Buddy relationships also extend beyond the school day or the school year, with involvement in after-school and summer activities. The buddies become friends of the family. One parent whose son has completed high school was thrilled that “he still has that continuous circle of friends.”

The COFP started out with assigning buddies to mentor students with disabilities; this synergy has resulted in genuine, long-lasting relationships between people. From the COFP’s beginnings in the special education classroom, the circle has extended its influence and provided a culture of acceptance so crucial for effective inclusion within schools.

Discussion and Conclusions

We purposely sought to apply an appreciative inquiry into the COFP to discover the positive core of experiences held by the people involved in the COFP and its potential to be a generative force in society. In doing so, we entered the study with the assumption that the COFP was already a force of transforming the lives of students with disabilities. This assumption did little to prepare us for the overwhelming way the COFP transformed the lives of its participants and those in its circle of influence. The COFP is making a profound contribution to improve the quality of life for the children with disabilities, their parents, mentors, and sponsors.

In many ways, the COFP challenges the guiding assumptions of society regarding people with disabilities. It challenges these guiding assumptions, not in an overt confrontational manner but with a velvet glove as it presents people with disabilities as worthy human beings who want to be a part of society and who can contribute meaningfully to society's continual evolution to a more equitable and just community of people. Moreover, it challenges these assumptions by daring to suggest that people with disabilities are society's teachers and become a gift to mainstream society, if mainstream society can open its mind and heart to the teachings of people with disabilities. In doing so, the COFP raised a series of fundamental questions about our society. The COFP asks the following:

1. What would our schools look like if students with disabilities were socially included with general education students?
2. How can general education students move toward acceptance and understanding of students with disabilities?
3. What if a school organization chose to become culturally competent in relation to

students with disabilities?

As a result, the COFP challenges the belief system within society that people with disabilities are different from those who consider themselves without disabilities. It raised the consciousness of those within the school environment by daring to suggest that it is important for human beings to care for others and to extend compassion to others. In this case, what the sponsors and buddies extended to the students with disabilities in the COFP was returned to them many times over. The COFP began with the premise that encouraging general education students to interact with students with disabilities would help the students with disabilities learn better social skills. Yet this study revealed that the COFP was mutually beneficial and transformative to everyone involved.

The COFP's challenge to society's guiding assumptions is heightened by its call to become a society that is a source of caring, compassion, and love toward all. Venturing beyond COFP's social and emotional benefits, we can speculate that social inclusion of students with disabilities can lead to better practices of educational inclusion of students with disabilities. As students without disabilities and teachers increasingly accept special education students, relationships between them are strengthened, thus paving the way for greater acceptance and participation of students with disabilities in general education classes. A program like Circle of Friends cannot substitute for appropriate support and professional development on modifying and differentiating instruction, yet through positive interactions with students with disabilities, regular education teachers can learn to see these students as having strengths rather than focusing solely on what they lack.

In many respects, the COFP asks us to elevate ourselves to what we can be and answers the call of Dr. Martin Luther King:

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of that old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!" (King Jr., 1963)."

Dr. King's words were spoken to the racial divide in the United States; however, they have great applicability to the divide that exists between general education students and students with disabilities. Based on our findings, it appears that the COFP's mission is to erase this divide. It does so by seeking out the best in people; it taps into the natural sense of altruism held by human beings. Smith (1981) suggests that altruism is a facet of human motivation where the individual receives a deep intrinsic sense of well being for making others feel well without the expectation of return from the other. In this case, however, the benefits received by the buddies, sponsors, and parents of children with disabilities in the COFP far outweighed their contributions. The power of the story is what it did for those without disabilities.

It was this altruistic sense that is seen in Vanier's (1999) story of Claudia. Claudia is a story of a girl who was blind and autistic. She became more secure and developed a sense of belonging because she was in a community permeated with love; the love that Claudia felt brought her intense joy. What that community did for Claudia, the COFP is doing for students with disabilities.

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