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# Buddy Bench: A Strategy to Increase Social Inclusion for Students with Special Needs

Sara K. Groen

*St. Cloud State University*, [skgroen@stcloudstate.edu](mailto:skgroen@stcloudstate.edu)

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**Buddy Bench: A Strategy to Increase Social Inclusion  
for Students with Special Needs**

by

Sara K. Groen

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Starred Paper Committee:  
Stephen Hornstein, Chairperson  
Hsueh-I Lo  
Marc Markell

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

An increasing number of students with special needs have become a part of the public schools over the past decades. As these students are integrated into schools, teams of professionals strategically plan for their academic, communication, motor, health, and social/behavioral needs to maximize students' potential for learning. Students with Specific Learning Disabilities, Emotional/Behavior Disorders, Physical Impairments, Other Health Disabilities, Developmental Cognitive Delays, and Autism Spectrum Disorder are spending more of their days in the mainstream setting than ever before. With this increase of inclusion, many parents and professionals are now seeing a concerning downside. While our students with special needs are being included in the school setting, many are also becoming socially isolated from their general education peers in the setting where many thought that they would experience the most success. The elementary school playground is generally considered a happy place where children can take a break from learning and play with their friends. For many students with special needs, the playground is a place where they often feel uncomfortable and isolated from their peers.

Entering into play is a complex task for children of all ages. For the past 17 years, Dr. Siu Lu Tan and her graduate students have participated in a "Playground Crew" that supports student social interactions at an elementary school (Tan, 2016). She and her students consistently see children struggling to enter into ongoing play. This struggle with entry behavior is due to the complexity of social situations. Tan listed the following strategies that children often use to enter into play and adults often use to enter into social interactions.

- **Hovering:** *Children: Circling around the activity. Adults: Sitting at the periphery, laughing softly or nodding, but not contributing anything to become part of the group)*
- **Direct request:** *Children: 'Can I play?' Adults: 'May I join you?' though we often hide behind more indirect requests such as 'Is this seat taken?')*
- **Disruption:** *Children: 'Let's play x' when the group is busy with y. Adults: Entering a discussion with a conversation-changer, such as 'Okay so here's a thought. Why do you think about...')*
- **Self-focus:** *Children: Entering by drawing attention to the self (e.g., 'Wanna see what I got?'). Adults: Entering an ongoing discussion with a self-statement: 'You'll never guess what just happened to me.')* (Tan, 2016, para.13)

While there are many strategies that can be used to successfully enter into ongoing play, it is nearly impossible to establish a formula for how to enter as each situation is so unique (Tan, 2016). Entering into play is even more difficult for students with special needs. Dr. Tan reported that, for students who have difficulty with their language ability, cognitive skills or emotional regulation “entry is an overwhelming task” (Tan, 2016, para. 17).

### **Buddy Bench**

The complex nature of entering into play has resulted in many students, both general education and special education, spending their time on the playground alone. Many educators teach lessons about including others, but unless a system is in place to help students become more aware of peers who are not being included, the problem is likely to remain. The concept of a Buddy Bench may help students who struggle with entering into play, as well as those students who want to help their peers feel included. According to the website [BuddyBench.org](http://BuddyBench.org), the Buddy Bench originated in Germany, but is gaining in popularity in the United States. In 2013 a Pennsylvania family was researching schools in Germany in preparation for an upcoming move.

Their first grader, Christian, noticed a picture of a special bench where children who were looking for someone to play with could sit. The family ended up staying in Pennsylvania and Christian proposed the idea of the Buddy Bench to his principal. The Buddy Bench at Christian's school received a significant amount of media attention and now there are thousands of Buddy Benches across the country. A Buddy Bench is a place where a child who is feeling lonely or cannot find a friend can sit. The idea is that children will keep an eye on the bench and will invite the lonely child to play (*"Christian's story,"* n.d.).

The website for Christian's Buddy Bench suggests these rules:

- *Before you sit on the Buddy Bench, think of something you would like to do. Ask someone else to play with you.*
- *The bench isn't for socializing. Only sit there if you can't find anyone to play with.*
- *While you're sitting on the bench, look around for a game you can join.*
- *If you see something you want to do or a friend you want to talk to, get off the bench!*
- *When you see someone on the bench, ask that person to play with you.*
- *If you're sitting on the bench, play with the first classmate who invites you.*
- *Keep playing with your new friends! ("Wanted: Playground Buddy," 2016, para. 6).*

The Buddy Bench is more than just a bench. According to Tan, "a Buddy Bench in the playground stands as a clear symbol that the teachers, staff, and student body at the school truly value social inclusion, and don't want anybody to be left out" (Tan, 2016, para.18). The addition of a Buddy Bench teaches students social-emotional learning and encourages kindness and inclusion (*"Empathy in Action: The 'Buddy Bench' at Todd Hall Elementary,"* 2016). All students will benefit from these lessons as much as they will benefit from being taught academics. Administrators from schools who have implemented a Buddy Bench feel the bench is teaching their students empathy. Steve Gardner, principal of Rick Hansen Public School in

Ontario, reported that “the bench has become a place of congregation rather than a place of alienation. It has become a gathering and meeting place” (Ottaway, 2016, para. 23).

### **Personal Reasons to do the Research**

My own interest in this topic stems from my experience teaching students with special needs. Many of the students with whom I work report spending recess alone or state that they do not enjoy recess. They often request to stay inside during recess, rather than spending time with their peers. During playground observations, many special education students stand out. These students are often by themselves, while their peers are playing with other children. I have observed special education students walking the perimeter of the playground rather than playing or following peers around the playground without attempting to initiate play. These students often stand with paraprofessionals rather than enjoy time with their classmates. When adults help these students initiate play with peers, the special education students often struggle to maintain the interaction once support is removed. When I interviewed the paraprofessionals who support these students on a daily basis, they confirm that my observations reflect a typical playground experience for many of our special education students. These students struggle to make and maintain connections with their peers.

The elementary school where I work is quite large, with 1,036 students in kindergarten through fourth grade. One hundred forty-three of these students currently receive special education support. Seventy-two percent of our students are Federal Setting 1 (they spend less than 21% of their day out of the general education setting). Six percent of our youngest students are a Federal setting 32, so spend the majority of their school day in the general education kindergarten setting. Eighteen percent of our students are a Federal Setting 2 (they spend

21-60% of their day outside of the general education setting). Four percent of our students are a Federal Setting 3 (they spend more than 60% of their day out of the general education setting). While the majority of our special education students spend most of their day in the mainstream setting, many of these students are not learning appropriate social and behavioral skills from watching their general education peers. Forty of our students currently receive some form of social skills instruction due to their cognitive, social or behavioral needs. Many of these students also have significant expressive and receptive language needs, which makes initiating and maintaining play even more difficult.

### **Research Questions**

What are the reasons students with special needs experience social isolation on the elementary school playground?

What strategies can be used to increase social inclusion?

Would the addition of a Buddy Bench on the playground increase social inclusion for special education students?

To answer these questions this study will review literature on

- Evidence of Social Isolation at School
- Reasons for Social Isolation
- Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion

### **Use of Findings**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the reasons that students with special needs experience social isolation on the playground and which strategies would increase social inclusion. The findings from this study will be used by special education staff to guide



instruction of social skills and to determine how best to support our special education students' social needs. Based on these findings, our school can determine if the addition of Buddy Benches would assist both special education and general education students in making peer connections while on the playground. This will ensure that all students have the opportunity to spend recess with a peer rather than alone.

### **Definitions**

This section provides definitions for relevant terms used in this paper.

- *Autism Spectrum Disorder*: a complex developmental disorder that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language and the ability to relate to others. It is a neurological disorder, which means it affects the functioning of the brain. The effects of autism and the severity of symptoms are different in each person (*“What is Autism Spectrum Disorder,”* 2016).
- *Externalized Behaviors*: those who exhibit externalizing behaviors engage in behaviors that harm others as opposed to lashing out at one's self (internalizing behaviors). Externalizing behaviors include physical aggression, verbal bullying, relational aggression, defiance, theft, and vandalism (Fraser-Thill, 2017).
- *Federal Settings*: refer to the percentage of time a student spends in special education:

Federal Setting I: 0-21% in special education

Federal Setting II: 21-60% in special education

Federal Setting III: 60% or more in special education

Federal Setting IV: separate special education site

Federal Setting V: public hospital, day treatment, correctional facility, etc.

(“*Acronyms Used in Special Education*,” n.d.).

- *General Education*: the program of education that typically developing children should receive, based on state standards and evaluated by the annual state educational standards test. It is the preferred way of describing its synonym, regular education (“*General Education: The Education Everyone Should be Provided*,” 2015).
- *Inclusion*: a term used to describe services that place students with disabilities in general education classrooms with appropriate support services. Students may receive instruction from both a general education and a special education teacher. Special education terms and definitions (“*Special Education Terms and Definitions*,” n.d.).
- *Momentary Time Sampling Observation*: is called an interval recording method. An interval recording strategy involves observing whether a behavior occurs or does not occur during specified time periods. Once the length of an observation session is identified, the time is broken down into smaller intervals that are all equal in length. For instance, a 30-minute observational session may be separated into 30 intervals that are one minute in (“*Momentary Time Sampling Recording*,” n.d.).
- *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (OBPP)*: a whole-school program that has been proven to prevent or reduce bullying throughout a school setting. The *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* is designed to improve peer relations and make schools safer, more positive places for students to learn and develop (“*Bullying*,” n.d.).

- *Paraprofessional*: a school employee who works alongside and under the supervision of a licensed or certificated educator to support and assist in providing instructional and other services to children, youth, and their families. Also called a paraeducator (*"Paraeducator Roles and Responsibilities,"* 2005).
- *Self-Contained Classroom*: classrooms specifically designated for children with disabilities. Self-contained programs are usually indicated for children with more serious disabilities who may not be able to participate in general education programs at all (*"Self-Contained Classrooms,"* 2015).
- *Social Skills Instruction*: teaches students appropriate interpersonal communication skills, self-discipline, and problem-solving skills. It combines a number of strategies to prevent and replace problem behaviors, and increase skills and behaviors leading to social competence. It is most effective when it becomes a part of the daily academic curriculum and is implemented on a class-wide and school-wide basis (*"Social Skills Instruction,"* 2009).

## Chapter 2: Review of Literature

### Evidence of Social Isolation at School

“The goals of inclusive education are to provide all children with a sense of community, belonging and the right to learn a common curriculum with same aged classmates” (Nowicki, Brown, & Stepien, 2014, p. 346). The expected benefit of inclusion was that interacting with typically developing peers would have a positive impact on the social development of students with cognitive delays (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Unfortunately, social exclusion is common in educational environments (Norwicki et al., 2014). Research shows that students with disabilities who are included into mainstream classes had a lower social status than their general education peers (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Studies conducted over the past decade showed peers’ attitudes toward children with different types of disabilities were neutral to negative (Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2013). Kemp and Carter cautioned that labelling students as special needs has the potential to affect peer acceptance, friendships, and self-concepts of students with mild disabilities. Research indicated that students with mild disabilities were often more likely to be socially isolated than their peers without disabilities (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Boer et al. (2013) reported that “approximately 30% of students with disabilities have significant fewer friends and are less accepted by their classmates than their typically developing peers” (p. 832). Research on students with learning disabilities showed that “students with LD are less liked by their peers and are more frequently rejected in inclusive settings than students without disability” (Heiman, 2000, p. 2). Unfortunately, minimal interaction between children with special needs and their same age peers is a frequent concern. “Collaboration between students with and without intellectual disabilities was marked by low levels of cooperative play, shared decision-making

and roles” (Heiman, 2000, p. 2). None of these effects were expected when inclusion was first implemented. “These outcomes seem to indicate that inclusive education is not always fulfilling its promise that students with disabilities benefit socially in general schools” (Boer et al., 2013, p. 832).

Because students often feel isolated in inclusive programs, many parents and educators question if they would be better served in self-contained programs. Hall and Strickett (2002) questioned whether students with disabilities would possibly experience more positive social interactions when they spent time with peers who had similar interests, maturity levels, and social skills. This would be more likely to occur in self-contained programs. These researchers found that students in self-contained special education programs had more friendships than their special education counterparts who were in inclusive settings and they had significantly more friendships with opposite gender peers than general education students of the same age. Hall and Strickett observed that when children with special needs were playing on the playground, their play was generally not at the maturity level of their typically developing peers. When educated in the separate special education setting, this immature play did not act as a social barrier as many of the peers with special needs had the same level of play skills. Kemp and Carter (2002) reported that students in third through sixth grades who attended separate special education programs rated their social skills and satisfaction with peer relationships higher than special education students who were fully included in the same building. These researchers noted that the awareness of difference could possibly impact their self-ratings. These findings all show positive impacts for students with special needs who are served in self-contained settings. One may think this would be a better option than inclusion; however, many of the concerns that are

often associated with putting students in inclusive programs, such as bullying and name-calling, were still observed in the self-contained programs (Hall & Strickett, 2002). In the self-contained program, students were still observed to spend more time isolated and more time engaging with adults than their same age general education peers (Hall & Strickett, 2002). While self-contained students report higher satisfaction with peer relationships, the levels of social isolation are comparable to those in inclusive settings.

Kemp and Carter (2002) followed a group of students with moderate cognitive delays as they transitioned from an inclusive preschool program to the inclusive elementary school program. They looked at the correlation between perceived social success and the actual amount of positive social interactions that special education students had with their peers during recess. When these researchers compared the student ratings of social status, they found that the special education student ratings did not differ significantly from their general education peers. This suggests that peers are generally rather accepting of their special education classmates. This was a positive finding for Kemp and Carter, especially when they compared their results to similar research that looked at peer relationships with disabled students who were rated negatively by their peers (Boer et al., 2013). Kemp and Carter felt that a reason for the increased acceptance of these more disabled children could possibly be that their disability was more apparent and due to this, typical developing peers were more forgiving of behaviors that were socially appropriate. Additional findings show that the special education students were socially interacting with peers on the playground, but significantly less often than their peers (Kemp & Carter, 2002). They were also observed to be engaged with adults significantly more than their general education peers (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Kemp and Carter were again pleased to see that while the target

group differed from their peers in the amount of time spent alone or with an adult, it was not nearly to the level that they had anticipated. These researchers noted that a possible reason for their positive interactions was that the inclusive preschool program they had previously attended had prepared the students socially for kindergarten.

The effects of social isolation can have lifelong impacts. Barrett and Randall (2004) stated that impacts of social isolation included achievement concerns at the secondary level, truancy, delinquent behaviors, dropping out of school, and mental health concerns. Because the effects of early social isolation can continue into adulthood, professionals must determine what factors are causing this isolation to occur.

### **Reasons for Social Isolation**

According to Boer et al. (2013), “the social participation of students with disabilities consists of four themes: interaction, peer acceptance, friendships, and social self-perception” (p. 832). Unfortunately, barriers often prevent students with disabilities from fully participating with peers. This raises the question of what barriers cause students with disabilities to be more socially isolated. In order for professionals to support students, reasons for this isolation must be identified.

Quality of life is directly impacted by establishing friendships early in one’s life (Kemp & Carter, 2002). “Early friendship is an important area because we know that social isolation can be a marker for later adjustment problems at school” (Barrett & Randall, 2004, p. 353). While friendship is desired by most children with special needs, their idea of what being a friend entails is often different from the views of their typically developing peers. When considering the characteristics of a good friend, special education students listed helpfulness, along with

being fun and entertaining, while typical developing peers said intimacy and emotional support were important factors in friendship (Heiman, 2000). Very few special education students in the study reported concern about the “emotional aspects of a close friendship” (Heiman, 2000, p. 8). This would support research that reported that students with special needs would generally seek emotional support from family members rather than their peers (Heiman, 2000). Heiman questioned if this difference in friendship quality could possibly be due to delays in expressive communication skills and their struggle to articulate what having a good friend actually meant.

When comparing students in a separate special education setting to those students who spent more time with typical developing peers, Heiman (2000) observed that the students who had more access to the general education setting were much more concerned with having friends. These students “tended to believe that conformist behaviour can be helpful in making friends, as well as giving things to others (such as candies, cards, small objects), or being willing to perform services” (p. 10). This behavior would likely be considered very awkward and a reason to avoid, rather than befriend, a peer. “Children who are not viewed as equals by their peers, and who lack the fundamental skills needed to form lasting friendships, may fail to develop age-appropriate social skills. This can result in continued social rejection or neglect” (Norwicki et al., 2014, p. 347). Peer attitudes and their level of interaction with their peers with special needs can be negatively or positively affected by peer pressure, familiarity with a specific disability, and strategies for handling issues related to specific disabilities (Woolley, Armitage, Bishop, Curtis, & Ginsborg, 2006). Norwicki et al. (2014) stated other reasons for social exclusion during childhood as “differences in ability or interests, group norms and behaviours that target specific social groups, in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice, and parental values and



expectations” (p. 347). The playground can be a difficult place to navigate for students with special needs; however, students who develop friendships are more likely to participate in the social aspects of the playground and report higher levels of happiness than their isolated peers.

Social/behavior concerns are common among students with special needs. When undesirable behaviors occur, peers are often hesitant to befriend or accept students with special needs. In their study of elementary age students in an inclusion program, Kemp and Carter (2002) noted “a relationship between the frequency of positive interactions and social acceptance and negative interactions and social rejection” (p. 408). Boer et al. (2013) found that peer acceptance was not related to the type of disability, but instead was directly related to student behavior. This was especially the case with girls, who were less accepting of female peers who exhibited internalizing or externalizing behaviors at school (Boer et al., 2013). Personality, along with age and impairment, was found to influence the extent to which children with disabilities will interact with non-disabled peers (Woolley et al., 2006).

Students with certain disabilities are more likely than others to have difficulty with social interactions. Ingram, Mayes, Troxell, and Calhoun (2007) observed that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) frequently invaded others’ personal space and had difficulty respecting boundaries. Students with ASD often have increased conflict with peers and engage in atypical behavior while on the playground (Gibson, Hussain, Holsgrove, Adams, & Green, 2011). While these behaviors isolated students with ASD from their peers, any positive social behavior positively impacted the peer acceptance of students with ASD (Boer et al., 2013). Boer et al. found that externalized behaviors negatively impacted the sociometric status of students with attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorders (ADHD), while qualities such as intelligence,

academic achievement, and physical attractiveness did not impact their peer acceptance.

Professionals must determine which specific behaviors are interfering with student acceptance for individual students in order to teach the skills that will promote social success.

“Play is a critical component of social participation for children, providing opportunities for social development and a sense of competence; playgrounds provide the context for play opportunities” (Cosbey, Johnston, Dunn, & Bauman, 2012, p. 39). When on the playground, elementary students engage in a variety of activities. Cosbey et al. stated that children prefer to play with those who have similar interests and play styles. The play style of children with special needs often differs from that of their peers. For example, children with cognitive delays often prefer play that is more sedentary than their peers and children with language impairments are less likely to engage in conversation (Cosbey et al., 2012). Because children with disabilities generally are delayed in development, as they grow a gap occurs between their skill level in play and that of their nondisabled peers (Cosbey et al., 2012). When assessing the playground skills of children with ASD, those with cognitive delays, and of typically developing children, Ingram et al. (2007) observed that children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) were significantly more isolated and significantly less likely than their peers to engage in social play. The children with ASD and those with cognitive delays were significantly less likely than their typically developing peers to initiate or sustain communication with a peer, demonstrate gross motor coordination, or use playground equipment functionally (Ingram et al., 2007). In order to engage with their typically developing peers, students with special needs must learn age-appropriate play skills.

The ability to successfully enter into ongoing play is a complex task for typically developing children of all ages. It is even more difficult for students with special needs. Beilinson and Olswang (2003) found that students with impairments in social language had more difficulty entering into play than their typically developing peers. Wilson (2006) stated that in order to be successful, an entry attempt must be well-timed and socially appropriate. Children who are most successful in entering play with others are those who have watched other children carefully enough to understand the theme of play so that they can comment on the theme when they ask to join (Wilson, Petaja, Stevens, Mitchell, & Peterson, 2011). These researchers found that students who struggle with impulse control often lack the patience required to attempt entry into play the several times it may take in order to be successful. This study reported that students who pay less attention to their peers often resort to solitary play after experiencing entry failure, rather than problem- solving and making another attempt to enter play (Wilson et al., 2011). Children who are shy, impulsive or aggressive may attempt to enter into a play situation very differently from one another, but the end result is often the same, with the child left isolated from peers.

McClure and Kinnison (1999) noted that, “children who consistently spend their recess sitting alone or with adults may be a risk for personality disorders and rejection from peers can be linked to a risk of juvenile delinquency later on” (p. 21). Children with special needs often require additional adult support from a paraprofessional in order to have success in an inclusive setting. Boer et al. (2013) stated that paraprofessional support negatively affected the level of peer acceptance of students with disabilities. These researchers also questioned the practice of assigning paraprofessionals to students with special needs due to the negative social impact it has

on the students. The presence of a paraprofessional in class “reduces the possibility of contact between the student with a disability and his/her peers and thereby sets the student apart” (Boer et al., 2013, p. 840). This study found that “only teacher assistance related significantly, and negatively, to friendships, but none of the child-related variables did” (Boer et al., 2013, p. 840).

### **Strategies for Promoting Social Inclusion**

Recess “is one of the ‘least restrictive times’ in the school day when the environment can promote inclusion and tolerance of differences among children” (McClure & Kinnison, 1999, p. 20). In order for students with special needs to experience the same level of inclusion as their nondisabled peers, a plan must be implemented to ensure that all children can enjoy the playground experience.

Miller, Cooke, Test, and White (2003) have found that “in the absence of naturally occurring friendships, educators can help students with moderate to severe disabilities develop friendships by implementing a circle process that provides peer support” (p. 169). One method of increasing social inclusion is through the use of friendship circles, such as the Circle of Friends Program. The purpose of the Circle of Friends Program (COFP) is to support social inclusion by increasing “the social network of students with disabilities by linking them to the social network of general education students” (Calabrese et al., 2008, p. 21). COFP helps create respect for students with disabilities and creates a better social experience in school (Calabrese et al., 2008). In COFP, a focus student with special needs is grouped with volunteer peers (buddies) who meet together on a regular basis to build peer relationships (Barrett & Randall,

2004). “A primary role of a buddy is to enlarge the social circle for children with disabilities (Calabrese et al., 2008, p. 23).

Peer network approaches to social inclusion are beneficial for students of all ages (Miller et al., 2003). Miller et al. (2003) reported increased social interactions in target students, along with increased appropriate behaviors, and a decrease in inappropriate behaviors after friendship circles were implemented. In addition to improving their peer relationships, benefits for the focus child include an increased self-esteem and improved communication skills (Calabrese et al., 2008). The benefits of a friendship circle affect more than the target student. In their study, Barrett and Randall (2014) reported that 70% of the peer buddies showed gains in self-esteem and the majority wanted to continue participating despite scheduling conflicts and the difficulties they may have encountered supporting a peer with special needs. Calabrese et al. (2008) stated that after participating in COFP, buddies reported that they were more compassionate and accepting of others. The impact of COFP is significant in schools where it used. In an interview, a student buddy stated that COFP had a “ripple effect” and that “once it became ‘cool’ to hang out with the students with disabilities, then the overall attitude toward these students changed” (Calabrese et al., 2008, p. 41). Another student buddy stated that the COFP “changed the school and the tolerance of students with disabilities by other students” (Calabrese et al., 2008, p. 41). School staff reported that friendship circles often expanded beyond the lunchroom and playground and into the classroom, with buddies helping their focus student with school work, organization, and behavior (Miller et al., 2003).

Navigating the social aspects of the playground is difficult, especially for students with disabilities. Skills that come naturally to their typically developing peers often must be taught to

students with disabilities. Gibson et al. (2011) stated that “the free-for-all of the playground is a challenging social environment; children engaging in successful peer interaction there demonstrate social-cognitive and communication skills at a more sophisticated level than those evident in other school contexts” (p. 2460). Kasari, Rotheram-Fuller, Locke, and Gulsrud (2012) compared an adult-assisted intervention for teaching social skills to children with ASD to a peer-mediated intervention. Kasari et al. (2012) found that the peer-mediated interventions caused a significant positive change in elementary students with ASD. Observations showed that target students were less isolated on the playground at the end of the intervention, while children who received the adult-led interventions had no significant changes in playground behavior (Kasari et al., 2012). Researchers took follow-up data 12 weeks after the intervention had been completed. This happened to be at the beginning of the next school year, with the students placed in new classes with different peers. The students who received the peer intervention had similar social ratings as they did at the end of the intervention, which shows that the target student with ASD was directly impacted and experienced social change by the peer intervention (Kasari et al., 2012). Their positive behavior on the playground also continued after 3 months, with less observed solitary play and more engagement in play and conversations (Kasari et al., 2012). The students who received the adult intervention showed less of an impact and the effect was not maintained over time (Kasari et al., 2012). They concluded, “only through the help of peers over time did children become less isolated” (Kasari et al., 2012, p. 438). Laushey and Heflin (2000) had similar success with training kindergarten students to be peer buddies for students with ASD. They reported that using a specifically trained peer buddy increased positive social interactions significantly more than just being placed in an inclusive setting (Laushey &

Heflin, 2000). Peer-directed interventions are a powerful tool that can be used to increase student skills deficits.

The concept of a Buddy Bench has grown in popularity in the United States in recent years. A Buddy Bench is a place where a student who may be feeling shy or lonely can sit in order to signal to peers that he or she would like to play with a friend (“Wanted: Playground Buddy,” 2016). The addition of a Buddy Bench to a playground teaches students social-emotional learning and encourages kindness and inclusion (“Empathy in Action,” 2016). Some feel that the use of a Buddy bench could reduce bullying on elementary playgrounds (Fuglei, 2016; “Wanted: Playground Buddy,” 2016). Fuglei (2016) stated, “when a school creates a visual signal that emotional and social connection is a priority in their community, it’s helping elementary students prioritize social connection” (para. 3). Once students are provided with initial instruction on how to use the Buddy Bench, staff must continue to have ongoing conversations about the use of the Buddy Bench to ensure that students are using it correctly (“Wanted: Playground Buddy,” 2016). Griffin and Calderella (2016) conducted a study of the effects of a Buddy Bench. These researchers found that solitary behavior in first-third grade students was reduced by 24% and solitary behavior in fourth-sixth grade students was reduced by 19% when the Buddy Bench was added. (Griffin & Calderella, 2016).

Peer perception of students with disabilities varies, as does their level of acceptance. Boer et al. (2013) found that boys and girls differed in the reasons for accepting or not accepting a peer with disabilities. Girls were more intrinsically motivated and it was found that girls with more positive attitudes were more likely to accept a peer with disabilities (Boer et al., 2013). Boys differed in that they were more influenced by the attitudes of their peers (Boer et al., 2013).

The findings of these researchers suggest that if interventions are put into place to improve the attitude of nondisabled peers, children with disabilities will have a higher likelihood of acceptance. Their research has shown that “peer attitudes improve when they learn more about disabilities” (p. 840). “Children become friends based on similar interests, activities, demographic, or personal characteristics” (Boer et al., 2013, p. 841), so educators must use strategies to make connections about student similarities in an effort to increase students’ acceptance.

Crawford, Livingston, and Swango (2004) reported that students with disabilities often stand out from their nondisabled peers due to their inappropriate use of playground equipment. In order for children with disabilities to engage socially with their peers on the playground, they must first learn the skills to appropriately play on the equipment (Crawford et al., 2004). Playground activities can lead to developing physical, cognitive, and social skills, so “recess is a critical environment for children’s social participation” (Cosbey et al., 2012, p. 40). Woolley et al. (2006) suggested that pre-teaching motor skills will allow children with disabilities to have more success on the playground. Crawford et al. (2004) stated the importance of making a task analysis for playground tasks and then engaging in direct teaching of the motor and play skills that children will require to be successful on the playground. In order to not be set apart from peers, children with disabilities will need to utilize play equipment both correctly and fluently (Crawford et al., 2004). “It is not just competence or skill level, but also their ‘comfort’ or ‘confidence’ level in engaging in certain movements without prompting or assistance from adults, that helps to determine their ability to ‘play’ with peers” (Crawford et al., 2004,



p. 40). Through direct teaching of playground skills, Crawford et al. were able to increase the skill level and endurance of children with special needs.

The structure of a playground makes an impact on student play, as well. Yuill, Strieth, Roake, Aspden, and Todd (2007) were able to increase group play and social initiations and decrease solitary play of children with ASD by modifying the structure of the playground. The new playground design included play activities that were an appropriate level of physical challenge, props for imaginative play, a circular railroad track that had crossing points to encourage repetitive play and student interaction, a playground design that created a natural flow from one activity to the next, and observation points where children could get away from peers, yet still be a part of the play by observing others (Yuill et al., 2007).

The goal of school staff is to best support students with special needs; however, adults can unknowingly cause a disruption in peer relationships. Students with special needs often receive a variety of services within their school day, including therapies and self-care support. Woolley et al. (2006), stated that it is best to keep routines and schedules as close to the same age peers' schedule as possible, which will allow more opportunities for peer interaction. When possible, keeping students with special needs with familiar peer groups from year to year will improve peer relationships and ease of transition (Woolley et al., 2006).

Woolley et al. (2006) wrote about best practices for support staff that they saw implemented on school playgrounds. While paraprofessionals are very concerned with safety, allowing a child with special needs to take reasonable risks on the playground will allow that child gain confidence, independence, and peer acceptance (Woolley et al., 2006). These researchers encouraged staff to be aware of student changes, so that when their confidence and

abilities increase, the paraprofessional will back away and allow the student to be as independent as possible. Awareness by staff that too close of supervision while on the playground will “interfere with the children’s ability to form relationships” (Woolley et al., 2006, p. 312) and will allow for children to engage with their peers in a more natural way. Research indicates that adult assistance is one of the key factors that discourages peer acceptance, yet many students will require adult support. Finding an appropriate balance of support and independence is key to a child’s social inclusion.

### Chapter 3: Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine the reasons students with special needs experience social isolation on the elementary school playground and to explore strategies, such as the Buddy Bench, that can be used to increase social inclusion. Research strongly supports providing students with special needs strategies to help them be successful on the playground. These students must be strategically taught skills that often come naturally for their general education peers. Initiating play with a peer has been described as a difficult task for typically developing children and one that becomes a barrier for many students with special needs (Tan, 2016). Buddy Benches provide students with a choice. Once students are taught how to properly use the Buddy Bench, it will be up to an individual student if he or she chooses to utilize the bench.

It has been determined that many of the students with special needs in my school struggle to make and maintain peer connections while on the playground. The large physical size of our playground, in addition to the high number of students in each grade level, can make it difficult to find a playmate at recess. Because of this, a second-grade teacher in our building taught her students a concept similar to that of the Buddy Bench. If a student in her class was unable to find a friend to play with, he or she would stand along a fence beside the playground. Just like with the Buddy Bench, her students were taught to occasionally glance over to check the fence in case a classmate was alone. According to this teacher, her students reported routinely using the fence to connect with peers during the first month of school. As the year progressed, she spent less time in her morning meeting reminding students about the fence, so she was unaware if

students continued using the fence to connect with peers. She did feel that it was very helpful transition tool for her students at the beginning of the school year.

### **Recommendations for Implementation**

I feel that implementing Buddy Benches on our playground would assist all of our students with that difficult step of initiating play with peers. Two benches were installed on the playground of our school, but have not yet been officially designated as Buddy Benches. In order for our school to have the most success with implementation, we must be thoughtful in planning how to teach our students to use the Buddy Benches.

Below are my recommendations for implementation of the Buddy Benches at the elementary school where I work.

1. **Imbed within School Wide Curriculum.** Fuglei (2016) stated that in order to be truly effective, the Buddy Bench must be a part of a bigger school-wide curriculum, such as Positive Behavior Intervention, that promotes positive social skills and an inclusive culture. Our school utilizes the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program and Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS). A committee of staff members meet on a regular basis to plan for activities that will unite our students, teach problem-solving skills and prevent bullying. Each month, our school has a specific theme around which lessons are designed. Use of the Buddy Bench should be included in these lessons.
2. **Staff Development:** In order to benefit our students, all school staff must be on board with the implementation of the Buddy Benches. Staff should receive initial instruction about use of the Buddy Benches during the in-service days before school

starts. Teachers already receive instruction about our school's monthly themes and are provided sample activities and topics for each day. Strategies for implementing the Buddy Benches should be provided this same way. Because our classroom teachers do not provide playground supervision, our special education and playground paraprofessionals would also need to receive training in order to support the use of the Buddy Benches.

3. **Student Instruction:** Our school day begins with Morning Meetings. During this time, every student is being taught the same social and behavior information at the appropriate developmental level. Morning meetings would be the logical time to instruct our students how to use the Buddy Benches. Strategies for implementing the Buddy Benches should be included during the first 6 weeks of school when all students are learning the rituals and routines.

Students should learn when to sit on the Buddy Bench and how to support another child who is sitting on the bench. Students should view videos showing students appropriately using a Buddy Bench. There are several wonderful videos available online that elementary schools have made providing instruction on using a Buddy Bench. These videos feature students of different ages using the Buddy Bench in a variety of scenarios. Students should also have the opportunity to role play different scenarios that involve using the Buddy Bench. There are numerous role play scenarios available online. These could be personalized to our school.

School staff must ensure that students have opportunities to refresh their understanding of the Buddy Bench throughout the school year.

4. **Student Ownership:** I feel that allowing the students in our school to create their own Buddy Bench videos would allow the students to take ownership of the Buddy Bench concept. Having videos featuring our school's playground would also help our younger students and those with cognitive delays to better understand the concept.
5. **Additional Instruction for Students with Special Needs:** Students with special needs would need more in-depth instruction on using the Buddy Benches. In addition to the instruction they would receive with their classmates in morning meeting, special education students who have cognitive, social and behavior needs would receive additional instruction during social skills groups. In addition to Buddy Bench use, the students in these groups should receive instruction on initiating play with peers, age- appropriate playground activities and problem-solving skills specific to the playground. During social skills groups, students are provided many opportunities to practice the skills that they are being taught. It would be essential for these students to practice using the Buddy Benches on the playground during this small group time before they attempt to use it during recess. Some students would also benefit from social stories with visuals describing the steps to using the Buddy Benches.
6. **Monitoring for Learning:** Informal observation should be used to see how the Buddy Benches impact students and to inform ongoing instruction. Special education students should be observed to determine if the addition of the Buddy Benches increases the amount of time that they spend interacting with peers. Staff should also monitor student use to ensure that students are not becoming dependent on using the

Buddy Bench. If this occurs, those students will need additional support in initiating play with peers.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Because the concept of a Buddy Bench is relatively new, there is currently very limited research available on this topic. Below are my recommendations for future research regarding the use of Buddy Benches.

1. **Effectiveness of the Buddy Bench:** As more elementary schools add Buddy Benches to their playgrounds, student use should be closely monitored to determine if it is an effective strategy to increase social inclusion for all students. Momentary time sampling observations could be used to assess the amount of time that students are spending alone on the playground when compared to the amount of time spent with peers. Student rating scales could also be used to determine if there is a correlation between increased peer interactions and students' positive feelings about recess.
2. **Effectiveness for Special Education Students:** It has been determined that students with special needs experience more social isolation than their general education peers (Kemp & Carter, 2002). Based on these findings, students with special needs may experience more benefits to using the Buddy Bench than general education students. Researchers should determine if there is a difference between the effects the Buddy Bench has on students with special needs when compared to general education students. Research could be conducted using the same methods as noted above.

3. **Buddy Bench Use by Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):** Many students with ASD prefer to spend recess alone, as it provides a much needed break from the demands of social interaction. The Buddy Bench may be a helpful tool to initiate play on the days that these students would like to play with peers. Sitting on the bench would provide their peers a visual reminder that the child would like to play that day. Researchers should study the effects the Buddy Bench has on students with ASD. Specifically, would students with ASD avoid the Buddy Bench or would it be a helpful tool in initiating play with peers?
4. **Impact on Paraprofessional Support:** Researchers have stated that the presence of a paraprofessional may potentially become a social barrier for students with special needs (Boer et al., 2013). Professionals must determine what can be done to reduce the amount of paraprofessional support that students require. If students with special needs are taught to independently use the Buddy Bench, it may reduce the need for some paraprofessional support. If students can engage with peers independently, the need for a paraprofessional to provide prompting is no longer necessary. Once play has been initiated and students are actively engaged with their peers, they may require less paraprofessional support as well. A research question for future researchers could be: does the implementation of a Buddy Bench reduce the amount of recess paraprofessional support required by students with special needs?
5. **Negative Behavior Related to the Buddy Bench:** One concern that educators and parents have expressed regarding the Buddy Bench is the possibility that students who choose to use the Buddy Bench may be teased for doing so. Another concern is



that some students who could benefit from using the Buddy Bench, may choose not to use it because they feel embarrassed. Researchers should determine the frequency that negative behaviors related to the Buddy Bench occur and what strategies school staff can implement to reduce these negative behaviors and encourage Buddy Bench use.

6. **Buddy Bench Use by Grade Level:** In their study, Griffin and Calderella (2016) found that the positive effects of the Buddy Bench were slightly more impactful at the primary grades, when compared to the intermediate elementary grades. Researchers should study Buddy Bench use by grade level. If it is found that certain grade levels are more likely to use or avoid the Buddy Bench, researchers should determine what factors are related to this choice. Would additional student instruction increase Buddy Bench use? Is there an age when Buddy Bench use becomes detrimental rather than helpful?
7. **Impact on Friendship:** Miller et al. (2003) found that implementing the Circle of Friends Program (COFP) has led to increased friendship for students with special needs. These friendships often continued outside of the COFP meeting time. Would the Buddy Bench have a similar effect? Researchers should study the impact that the Buddy Bench has on friendship, both on and off of the playground. After students are initially connected by means of the Buddy Bench, researchers should determine if these students continue to seek each other out and play together on subsequent days. When this is the case, researchers should find if the friendship continues off of the

playground. The impact the Buddy Bench has on friendship should be examined between both general education and special education students.

8. **Buddy Bench Use on a Community Playground:** Buddy Benches are increasing in popularity on elementary school playgrounds. I have not found that any Buddy Benches have been placed on community playgrounds. Once a Buddy Bench has been successfully implemented at an elementary school playground, it would be interesting to research if these same students would utilize a Buddy Bench located in their local community park.

As educators, we are trained to pay close attention to our students' academic skills. We monitor their learning and help them gain the skills needed to be successful in the classroom setting. We must pay equal attention to our students' social skills so that they are able to be successful and independent on the playground and in life. While the Buddy Bench alone will not solve the problem of isolation on the playground, I feel that it has the potential to significantly bridge the gap of initiating play for many students with special needs. My interest in Buddy Benches has been focused on special education students; however, it is very likely that general education students would experience positive benefits as well. A third-grade student from Illinois feels that the concept of a Buddy Bench should be shared with others. "I've told my friends all about it, because when you see someone who's not happy—well they should be because everyone deserves to be happy" ("Empathy in Action," 2016, para. 3).

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