

# **The meaning of social inclusion to players with, and without, intellectual disability in Unified Sports Teams**

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## **Acknowledgments**

The study was funded by Special Olympics International. Our grateful thanks to Lina Bardhan, Florian Pochstein and Michelle Willis for facilitating some of the groups.

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## **Abstract**

Sport can be a means for promoting social inclusion but to date, the perspectives of participants have been rarely sought. Focus groups interviews were held with six Special Olympic, Unified Sports teams in the USA as well as one each in Germany and India. In all, 49 athletes with intellectual disability and 39 team-mates without disability participated. From a thematic content analysis, a core concept of togetherness emerged, with five sub-themes of equality, friendships, participation, connections and assistance. Four main feelings were associated with togetherness: happy, relaxed, confident and cared for. The players gave specific examples of how these outcomes were realised in sport and community settings. Their insights could guide future attempts to promote social inclusion in sports and the wider community.

## **Key words**

Inclusion Sports Intellectual Disability Special Olympics

## Introduction

People with intellectual disability often experience social isolation (Bogenschutz et al., 2015; Verdonschot, De Witte, Reichrath, Buntinx, & Curfs, 2009). In part, this arises from the specialist services provided to them and their families, which have segregated them from their peers from early childhood through to old age. Moreover the societal stigma and prejudices associated with this disability has further alienated them within their communities, even within their family circle (Scior, 2011).

Social isolation reduces a person's quality of life; particularly as it prevents them from availing of opportunities that are open to their non-disabled peers in education, employment, housing and leisure activities (Schalock, 2004). Not surprising people with disabilities have been to the fore in seeking greater inclusion within society and their efforts have been rewarded in the Convention of Rights of Persons with Disabilities (United Nations, 2006) which embodied in its principles "full and effective participation and inclusion in society". However this still remains an unfulfilled ambition for many persons with intellectual disability despite a growing literature that documents their desire for greater inclusion (Bonham et al., 2004; Garcia-Iriarte, O'Brien, McConkey, Wolfe, & O'Doherty, 2014).

Social inclusion is a complex, multi-component concept that is capable of varied meanings and indicators (Cobigo, Ouellette-Kuntz, Lysaght, & Martin, 2012). In the context of intellectual disability, research to date suggest that social inclusion can be viewed as the interaction between two major life domains of interpersonal relationships and community participation (Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015). Equally inclusion is better viewed as a dynamic process involving personal characteristics, social

networks and environmental opportunities which will vary for individuals over time and across the different social contexts of their life (Overmars-Marx, Thomese, Verdonschot, & Meininger, 2014). This complexity may help to explain why it has proven difficult to increase and sustain the social inclusion of children - but more especially adults - with intellectual disability (Kozma, Mansell, & Beadle-Brown, 2009).

A contributory factor however could be the relative dearth of research into what people with intellectual disability understand by inclusion and how they themselves experience being included. Past research has focused more on proxy reports from families and professionals and used structured questionnaires derived from particular conceptual frameworks (Merrells, Buchanan, & Waters, 2017). Yet there is a growing literature that demonstrates the feasibility of including people with intellectual disability as informants and guidance on facilitating their contributions (Kaehne & O'Connell, 2010; Hollomotz, 2018).

Sport has been promoted as a promising context for promoting the social inclusion of marginalized groups including ethnic minorities and socially disadvantaged youth (Sport for Development and Peace, 2008) although thus far, there has been limited studies involving people with intellectual disability (McConkey, 2016). Nonetheless sport has featured as a favored leisure activity in national surveys (e.g. Robertson & Emerson, 2012). Likewise Special Olympics has proved popular internationally and is the largest promotor of sports for people with intellectual disability (Harada, Siperstein, Parker, & Lenox, 2011). A recent systematic review of 46 studies identified increases in the social skills of athletes and in their friendships from participation in Special Olympics (Tint, Thomson, & Weiss, 2017).

More recently, Special Olympics has promoted the concept of Unified Sports and in 2016 an estimated 1.4 million players world-wide took part in what has become the fastest growing program of the organization (Special Olympics,2018). Unified Sports brings together on the same team, athletes with intellectual disability of higher sporting abilities and their age peers without disabilities (known as partners) who tend to have average or lower ability in the chosen sports. Hence teams aim to have players of similar level of sports skills. Sports include soccer, volleyball, basketball, handball, athletics and table tennis. The players train together usually on a weekly basis and take part in competitions with other Unified teams at local, national and international Games. Unified Sports are initiated through schools, Special Olympics Clubs and mainstream sports clubs. Coaches are volunteers who are recruited from schools, disability services, Special Olympics or mainstream sports organizations and training resources are available for them (see: <http://www.specialolympics.org/unified-sports.aspx>).

To date there has been a paucity of research relating to Unified Sports per se. However a multinational study in Europe reported gains for both athletes and partners in their personal development and the creation of inclusive and equal bonds among the teams (McConkey, Dowling, Hassan & Menke, 2013). However, there appeared to be less impact on the athlete's inclusion in local communities; which the broader review of research into Special Olympics by Tint et al. (2017) also confirmed. Nonetheless, the primary rationale for Unified Sports as articulated by Special Olympics, is that the inclusion experienced by players in the context of sport would facilitate their inclusion within the wider neighborhood or community especially as their social networks were

extended to include non-disabled peers whose attitudes may have become more positive towards the team partners. This raised the question as to what more Unified Sports should do to promote greater community inclusion of athletes with an intellectual disability?

It was against this background that the present study was initiated by Special Olympics International. The beginning point was to gain a better understanding as to how athletes understood what it meant to them to be included in sport teams and in their local neighborhood outside of sport (Corby, Taggart & Cousins, 2015). Insights into their feelings about inclusion and its benefits would also be sought. These findings could guide sports coaches as to how Unified Sports could better facilitate the inclusion of players with an intellectual disability. In summary, the study had three main aims.

- To understand the meaning of social inclusion to players who had participated in Special Olympics Unified Sports.
- To elicit the feelings that players associate with being included and excluded.
- To identify the benefits that players experience from participating in Unified Sports.

In meeting these aims, it was decided to include players with intellectual disability and their team-mates who were non-disabled so that similarities and contrasts between them could be identified. Moreover teams were recruited in USA, Germany and India to determine if there were cultural differences in how inclusion in sports and community was perceived (Merrells et al., 2017). A qualitative methodology was chosen as this privileged the voice and experience of the participants and drew on their lived experience of inclusion within Unified Sports as well as in the wider community (Overmars-Marx et al., 2014).

Although the findings may be specific to Unified Sports of Special Olympics, they could give insights into how people with intellectual disability could be included in mainstream sports and possibly other community activities.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Six Unified teams, were identified in two US States: Connecticut and California by Special Olympics managers for the Unified Sports Program internationally. These States had successfully implemented and sustained Unified Sports in schools or clubs over a ten-year period. The emerging findings were then validated with two further nominated Unified teams; one each in Germany and India. In all, 49 athletes with intellectual disability and 39 players without disabilities participated in the eight group interviews. They ranged in age from 16 to 25 years and all had been involved with Unified Sports for at least one year.

### **Procedure**

Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the IRB Board of Special Olympics International. An information sheet and consent form, in an easy-read format with illustrations and translated into local languages as needed, was given to all participants. Throughout it was made clear that participation was voluntary and would not affect their involvement in Special Olympics; all answers were confidential and no one would be identified in any reports.

The interviews took place over a three-month period and occurred before or after a team training session. The groups consisted of players who were willing and available to take

part. There was an average of 11 participants in each group with a mix of players with and without intellectual disability, except in India which had non-disabled players. The groups were facilitated by an independent researcher and an audio-recording was made of all contributions. A verbatim transcript in English was made from all recordings with translations from German and Hindi undertaken by the facilitators.

A structured interview schedule in line with the aims of the project was prepared. The session opened by the facilitator explaining the purpose of the study and obtained consent from the participants to proceed.

In order to provide a visual referent and to make the conversation more meaningful especially for participants with intellectual disability, the groups were shown three photographs of scenes in which groups of young people were taking part in activities together (café, music-making and house repairs). In each picture, one person was identified by the facilitator and the group was asked if s/he was being included or being left out? The group were then asked: 'how do you know when people are included?' They were prompted to recall examples from their own lives when they have felt included. They were further asked: 'how does it make you feel when you are included?' and 'why is it important to be included?'

These discussion triggers were then repeated with three further pictures that showed a person being left out (watching TV unaccompanied, alone in café and walking away from a group). The trigger questions were: 'are they left out or are they included?'; 'how do you know when people are left out?' and 'how would you feel if this was you who were being left out?'

In the third part of the group interview, participants were shown two pictures of Unified Sports teams at play. The trigger questions were: 'are people who play Unified Sports – included/left out?'; 'why is it important for everyone to be included in a Unified Sports team?'; 'At Unified Sports do some people sometimes feel left out/ excluded? Why is this?' and 'What do you do to make new players at Unified Sports to feel included/ that they belong? The benefits gained from participation were also prompted.

The facilitator ensured that all participants had a chance to participate to the discussions which lasted on average around 30 minutes. Data saturation was reached as no new themes emerged in the final group held in the USA.

### **Data analysis**

Braun & Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic content analysis was used to analyse the English transcripts from the eight groups. This was initially undertaken by the first author and cross checked by the second author who had also facilitated four groups in the USA. Any discrepancies were discussed and a consensus obtained.

After reading and re-reading of all the transcripts, the second step was the open coding of participants' responses in each of the focus groups. In a third step, these codes were then grouped into coherent and distinct sub themes that best captured most of the codes assigned in response to the three topics covered by group interviews: namely the sub-themes relating to the meaning of inclusion, the emotions associated with inclusion and the benefits from participation in Unified Teams. The subthemes were then reviewed and clarified through discussion between the two raters. Definitions were agreed and quotations that best exemplified the subtheme were chosen. In addition, one super-ordinate theme was identified in relation to inclusion as suggested by

grounded theory approaches (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). This provided an overarching summary of the meaning of inclusion to the participants.

The emergent analyses were sent to the other two group facilitators for confirmation but due to resource constraints it was not possible to member check them directly with the group participants. However in all the group interviews, the facilitators summarized the main points of the discussion and sought confirmation for them from the participants. All the subthemes identified were present in responses from both sets of participants as the following quotations illustrate. Most of the themes were also present in the interviews undertaken in Germany and India and no new themes emerged from these groups.

## Findings

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

A recurring comment throughout all the interviews was the core idea that inclusion meant 'togetherness'. Both partners and athletes elaborated on what this meant for them and how togetherness was expressed in their experiences with Unified Sports in particular. For example:

*Like they're in a group together, it's not like one person's out, and the other people are by themselves. They're all in conversation with each other, everyone is acknowledged and interacting with each other. Partner, USA.*

*People with and without disability just being together, playing together, Just see, who is better with this and who is better with that. Athlete, Germany.*

*I think being included on a team is even more special because we all have matching jerseys, we all wear them together and you can tell we're all one group. Athlete, US*

However as Figure 1 summarises, five sub-themes also emerged that created the concept of 'togetherness'. By contrast exclusion was expressed as the opposite to the themes named in the figure.

## Subthemes of togetherness

**Equality.** This theme was expressed in various phrases used by players such as 'treated as equals'; 'everyone gets a turn'; 'acceptance'; 'respect'; 'equal right of speaking'; 'everyone has talents'; 'let people be themselves'.

*Everyone should have the right to have their voice heard. Partner, USA*

*Even the people on the other (Unified) teams cheer for you. Usually in regular sports it's like only your people would cheer for you. Athlete, USA.*

By contrast, exclusion was expressed as 'people bully you'; 'not trusted'; 'people are mean to you'; 'people cheat on you'.

*That's what happens in soccer, people push us. Athlete, USA.*

**Friendships.** Included meant having friends: it was like a family; being part of a gang; feel like you have known the people for ever. Alternatively exclusion meant: having no friends; no one to talk to; not knowing anyone; people are icy to each other.

*I like being in the group of peers, it's my life, and these guys are like my family. So it's a good energy. Athlete USA*

*I like to play in a group. I do have my friends and my parents. Athlete, India*

*It just sucks in general to feel left out or ignored. Partner, USA.*

**Participation.** The participation subtheme was defined more often in terms of exclusion rather than inclusion with these words and phrases occurring across all groups: 'alone, left out, lonely, isolated, sitting out, watching others, outside looking in, left on the bench, people are in cliques'. Participation was described in terms such as: 'joining in, sharing; hang out together; part of a gang; everyone's involved'.

*Everyone's being included when playing the game. And everyone's being brave in their attempt.* Partner, USA

*I like to skate so I go to the skate park every day. I went and all my friends went away when I got there.* Athlete, USA

*Just go to the basketball or football and look for someone to play with, not only watching TV all the time. So get into contact with the sport and continue to be friends later on.* Athlete, Germany

**Connections.** This subtheme took inclusion beyond participation and emphasized the connectedness with others in words such as: 'belonging, sharing; co-operating; work together as a team; we stick together; get along with each other. The sense of being disconnected was expressed as: ignored, secluded, not knowing anybody, don't pass the ball to you, players are very competitive.

*They could win a big trophy if they work together. We almost won the big trophy yesterday.* Athlete, USA

*I'd feel desolate. It's important to have the opportunity to meet with friends.* Partner, Germany

*The love and affection the (athletes) share is totally different from us. It is very pure compared to what we get in the rest of the world. The affection has made me more pure.* Partner, India

**Assistance.** This subtheme was more prevalent among players with disabilities but not exclusively to them and expressed mainly in terms of inclusion rather than exclusion. For example: others care about me; people cheer you on; helpful to each other; help you if you fall down, somebody to back you up, somewhere to go if you have problems or in trouble.

*She needs help and she asked people to do work at her house ... she's getting support from friends.* Athlete USA

*You have those people who are the Unified partners that are there to help the athletes and guide them through. Athlete, USA*

*Even if it's a bad play just keep cheering them on. Tell them you got it next time. Partner, USA.*

In summary, the participants articulated a clear understanding of how they experienced inclusion or exclusion in sports in particular but these echoed their experiences in wider society. The five subthemes identified help to define the different dimensions to inclusion as experienced by these players and provide an insight into how inclusion was nurtured within the teams.

### **Feelings associated with inclusion and exclusion.**

Participants were explicitly asked to name the emotions they experienced when being included or exclusion in sports and in their everyday lives. These could be grouped into the following sub-themes with the emotions they associate with exclusion as the opposite to those named.

*Insert Figure 2 about here*

**Happy.** This theme included comments such as have fun; smiling; joking with one another; laughter and good vibes. Among the converse comments for exclusion were: 'unhappy; sad; feel like crying, upset; down in the dumps; it stinks, feeling gray and blue'.

*If you're not so happy, you're not included, but if you are included, you're very happy.*  
Athlete, USA

*A large group has fun, and alone it is not so funny. We have to include the athletes more, so it is more fun for everyone.* Partner, Germany

*Happiness is the thing we gain from teamwork. It feels great to be a part of a team and so happiness is the ultimate thing we gain from teamwork.* Partner, India.

**Relaxed.** This was defined more in terms of the emotions associated with exclusion rather than inclusion: for example, 'nervous, afraid, scared, out of my comfort zone, embarrassed; whereas the participants spoke of inclusion in terms of 'no worries in the world when there; looking forward to going; time of my life.

*He looks nervous...he's not really with the group. Maybe he's embarrassed to meet new friends* Athlete, USA.

*You go into Unified ... you have all this stress and you go in and see all these people, so carefree and so happy, and no one is stressed out, it's just a very relaxed and fun environment. I think that's really important to have that balance in High School.* Partner, USA

**Confident.** Participants spoke of inclusion as giving them good energy; its inspiring, boosts you up; enthusiasm; it's a picker upper; get pumped up; others are proud of us'. By contrast exclusion was associated with shyness, feeling inferior, feeling something is wrong with me and no self-confidence.

*When you are brand new you may feel down, but then you feel like getting in Special Olympics and you get to know a lot of people, you get to build energy and have more fun with your peers.* Athlete, USA.

*They (athletes) lost their self-confidence. You must help them. They can't do it on their own.* Partner, Germany.

*(You have to) believe in yourself.* Athlete, USA.

*Being included is like such a great feeling, like your whole self-confidence, like self-esteem.* Partner, USA.

**Cared for.** When people were included they also reported feeling cared for and spoke in terms of feeling loved; affection; everyone being very gentle.

*I know everyone is very gentle here, that's a good feeling. It changed everything.* Athlete, Germany

*I've noticed during Unified basketball games players would fall down and the other team would help them get back up. But outside Unified, there is really none of that. Everyone laughs when the other team falls.* Partner, USA

The opposite of the cared for theme was not explicitly mentioned in terms of exclusion although it is implicit in the previous three subthemes and the uncaring attitudes of others reported previously.

In summary, the issue of inclusion was certainly an emotive one for the participants which they described with little prompting.

### **Benefits of inclusion**

Finally the participants were asked to name the benefits which they experienced when they were included and most answered in relation to their experience of Unified Sports. Their responses could be grouped into three themes which applied to both the athletes and the partners.

**Personal development.** Responses in this theme included: learning new skills; opportunity to be successful; more confident, accomplish something; communicate better, talk in front of other people; positive mentality, and show you can do things as well as others.

*It's great to have Special Olympics to guide you to learn skills to be yourself. On the Unified Sports team, you get the energy and you practice every week and you know you can do it.* Athlete, USA

*You learn how to behave. If I meet someone outside of Unified I know how to handle the person better now with my experiences from Unified.* Partner, Germany

**Opportunities provided.** Participants spoke of make new friends, invitations to birthday parties; new experiences you do not get elsewhere; go to different places; .

*You have somewhere to go to when you have problems ...if you're included, it makes you feel like you have a place to go if you're having trouble. Athlete, USA*

*It has changed my ability to mingle with friends, my level of emotion. We are not very polite to people sometimes. But seeing their (athletes) politeness, love and affection to us has made me learn so many things. Partner, India.*

**Changed attitudes.** This theme featured mainly in the responses of the partners without disabilities who mentioned: prejudices removed; remove stigma of disability and changed mind-set.

*I think I've changed – more accepting of diversity ... I try a lot harder to see beyond the disability and look at you know the benefits and what they can do. Partner, USA*

*It makes you a better you through associating with kids with disabilities. I get to know them on a personal level. Partner, USA*

In conclusion, participants reported a range of benefits associated with inclusion in sports and in other social activities in addition to the emotions and experiences gained through inclusive activities.

## **Discussion**

These findings cannot claim to be representative of all Unified Sports teams and indeed the participants were selected because they belonged to teams that were deemed particularly successful. Nevertheless, the findings do provide some insights into the process of creating inclusive teams from the perspective of the players and which were validated across eight teams drawn from different states and countries. Certain findings are particularly noteworthy.

The study drew on the experiences of both athletes with intellectual disability and their non-disabled partners. They recounted similar experiences in what made for inclusive teams as well as experiencing similar emotions and gaining comparable benefits from their participation. In one sense, this is not surprising as they were engaged in the same activity under similar circumstances and probably for similar reasons, notably the enjoyment of sports.

The core theme of 'togetherness' captures the essence of mutual inclusion as does the subtheme of equality. This suggests that for inclusion to be attained and maintained, both parties have to gain from it, which has not always been the case in other attempts to promote the social inclusion of persons with intellectual disability within education or employment for example (Amado, Stancliffe, McCarron, & McCallion, 2013). Moreover the emotions engendered in Unified Sports and the benefits perceived to come from it, are likely to sustain the participation of non-disabled players which is crucial to maintaining and possibly extending inclusive opportunities (Kiuppis, 2018). Nonetheless the starting point is the creation of shared spaces – in this instance Unified Sports - where people encounter difference and learn to communicate with one another (Meininger, 2013).

The study also confirmed the importance of relationships to the participants' understanding of inclusion as reflected in the subthemes of friendships, participation and connections. Although identified separately, these themes likely grow out of one another in that acquaintances develop among the players and, as they participate as equals in shared activities, a sense of connectedness and of belonging starts to emerge (Mahar, Cobigo, & Stuart, 2013). The regularity of training sessions and competitions is

probably a necessary component in nurturing these processes. That too is an important lesson for the wider promotion of persons with intellectual disability in local communities: persistence and continuity are crucial to developing relationships (Overmars-Marx et al., 2014).

The study did not directly address the extent to which inclusion in sports had led to greater inclusion in other aspects of players' lives. Other studies suggest that this can be an outcome, especially when the partners and athletes meet socially (McConkey et al, 2013). In this respect, the partners can act as a bridge into community activities that people with intellectual disability could not access for themselves nor might they be encouraged to do so because of the possible risks they might encounter. Moreover the increased confidence that athletes reported in gaining from sports should further assist them in new social contexts (Tint et al., 2017). Longitudinal studies that track the inclusion experiences of both athletes and partners in local neighborhoods and communities would be valuable addition to the literature.

Nor did the study explore with players the role that coaches played in nurturing inclusion within and beyond the teams, although a companion study did examine this with the coaches involved with the same teams (Authors' reference 1). However the availability of personnel to facilitate inclusion is an important component of success as others have noted (Overmars-Marx et al., 2014). Yet professional support staff for persons with intellectual disability may encounter many difficulties in undertaking this role (van Asselt-Goverts, Embregts, Hendriks, & Frielink, 2014). Informal community recreation programs may be better suited to the promotion of social inclusion (Messells at al., 2017). Future research could usefully elaborate on the role of coaches in Unified Sports

and the strategies they have used that have led to increased inclusion among the players both on and beyond the sports field.

A major impediment in research on the community inclusion of people with intellectual disability has been the lack of suitable measures that capture their views and experiences (Coombs, Nicholas & Pirkis, 2013). This is particularly necessary in assessing the impact of programs such as Unified Sports that aim to advance social inclusion. Hence one further outcome from this study, has been the development a questionnaire that can be used through interviews with athletes to assess their social inclusion within sports as well as in the local neighborhood and community (Authors reference 2, 2018). The items are based mainly on verbatim comments from players in this study so unlike existing tools it is based on the lived reality of people with intellectual disability. Respondents rate on a three-point scale if each item holds true for them. Field-testing with over 1,000 players has shown promising psychometric properties. This tool would enable more representative samples to be involved in research and evaluation studies into the promotion of social inclusion; not only in sports but in other domains that are important for persons with intellectual disability.

In conclusion, the aims of the study were met in that the main features of how people with an intellectual disability view inclusion were identified along with the feelings they associated with inclusion and the benefits accrued from it. Moreover these were confirmed with their non-disabled sport partners. However future research could usefully determine the extent to which these themes are present for representative samples of participants in Unified Sports internationally as well as persons with intellectual disability uninvolved with sport. Moreover the role of coaches in promoting

inclusion through sport deserves further attention as would a longitudinal evaluation of the impact of intervention programs, such as Unified Sports, on the community inclusion of people with intellectual disability.

(4,659 words)

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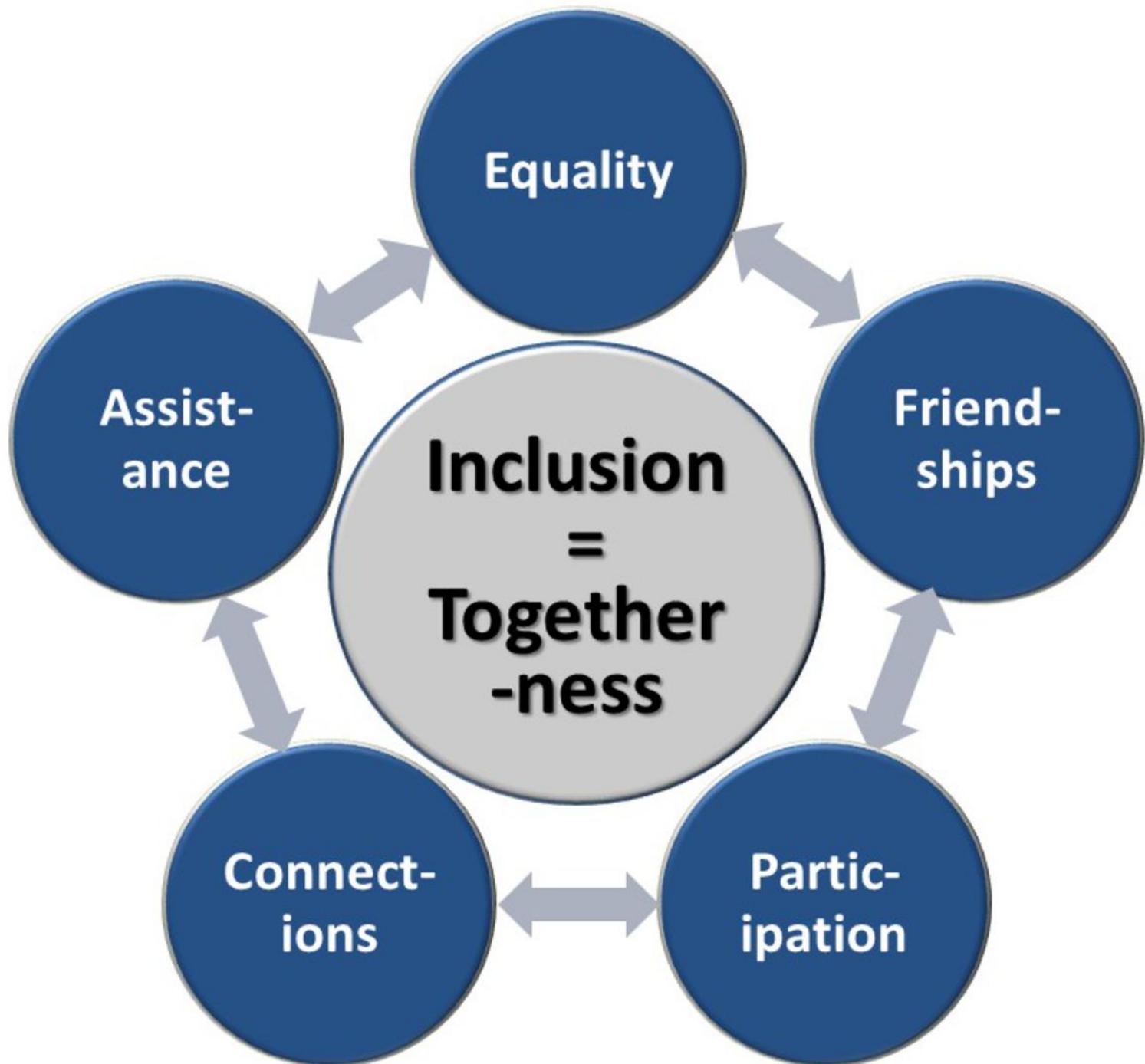
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**Happy**

**Cared  
for**

**Inclusion  
=  
Together  
-ness**

**Relaxed**

**Confid-  
ent**