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# Play it Forward: The Importance of Cooperative Learning & Structured Play During Recess with a Focus in Special Education

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Play it Forward: The Importance of Cooperative Learning & Structured Play During Recess with  
a Focus in Special Education

Juan Lopez

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### Abstract

For this Capstone Project, the researcher investigated how teachers and administrators view the participation of students with special needs in recess opportunities and how to improve that participation. This is an important issue because students need the social aspect of playing with different children and going out of their comfort zones. This will help them as they grow older. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, the researcher used what he learned to formulate an action that responded to the focus issue in a way that inspired, informed, or involved a particular audience.

### Setting the Stage

I remember when I was in special education class in elementary school, I would be excluded by students who were not in special education. The reason why they would not invite my friends and I to play with them was because they thought we were too dumb. They would belittle all of the students in special education, so my friends and I would just hang out with each other to avoid being belittled. We would never bother to ask them if we can play with them because we already knew the answer; which would always be no. So my friends and I would just play with one another. We would play four square, tag, hide and seek, and follow the leader. It was really rare when we played four square because other kids who were not in special education would steal our ball. When that would happen to us, we would never tell any adult because the kids who would pick on us would tell us that if we told we would get a beat up. This would happen so often that we would get our ball stolen so instead we would just play another game that did not require a ball.

My friends and I would always get picked on no matter if we excluded ourselves from the mainstream students or not. They would always ruin our day. My friends and I would hate kids who were not in special education. Deeply in our heart we wanted to play with other students but it was nearly impossible. I really did not want to become an adult and feel excluded from people but we were going to need help from adults. One day, our teacher told us that we were getting a new recess program. We were excited to finally get a new program that included everybody. The new program was called "Everyone Plays". This program was designed for all students to play together, including special education students and mainstream students. The games that this program included was sports, fun-games, board-games, and art. This program also brought college students and parents to come participate with us during recess to help run the program.

One week after the program was enforced there was dramatic change with us. My friends and I began to finally meet new friends. We still had a few bullies that picked on us but not as bad as before. The program really impacted our lives in a positive way. Everyday we would look forward to recess. My favorite part of the program was that every station that the new program had depended on what we wanted to do and they all had supervision. Everyday the students had the option to go to either the sports station, art station, board games station, or fun games station. We had so many options. This program brought happiness for only a year. The reason why was because the district did not have any funding. My friends and I were so devastated. We were again on square one. My friends and I were again getting picked on. It felt like the program never existed.

This program really impacted the lives of my friends and I. It was the perfect solution to include special education students with mainstream students. I was really inspired by this program that when I become a principal I will make sure I can have the funds to create a program like "Everyone Plays". I will make sure that I keep the program alive so that my future special education and mainstream students can always look forward to recess. I do not want my future students to have to go through the same situation I went through because I really thought the program I had going at my school as a child was going to last forever.

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### **Literature Synthesis and Integration**

#### **What is the issue?**

Schools have been trying to figure ways to allow students to communicate and play together without bullying and in a safe environment, especially special education students being integrated with mainstream students. The issue is how can students come together and play safely and be able to learn from each other positively?

Wang (2013) identifies that if you were to ask a 6 year old child what the best thing at school is, the answer is usually recess. The author specifies a direct link to the importance of recess. Wang gives special tips and ideas to help a special needs student to benefit from recess without making it uncomfortable for them. Wang describes how special needs students sometimes need ways to help them enjoy recess without them feeling overwhelmed at the end of it.

Vandermeulen (2016) discusses how all students can feel included even if on some days their usual buddies or friends are not there. If they are new to the school, The Buddy Bench allows other students as well as the child on the bench feel comfortable to be asked or to ask to play. Vandermeulen discusses how the Buddy Bench system is a positive for recess since it allows students to learn that all students can be included in the games they play. Before the Buddy Bench children who had no one to play would sit their entire recess alone, because other students did not know if they were allowed to play or they did not feel comfortable going up to a student that was alone. The Buddy Bench gives a positive and comfortable approach for all involved. Eredics (2014) tries to find ways to make special needs students feel included, not just

in the classroom but outside of the classroom also. Sometimes students with special needs are ignored of their needs and base it on them just wanting to be inside even during recess. This is not the case sometimes because like mainstream students, they also want to play outside but on their own level. Eredics describes how recess for special needs students is beneficial in emotional and social growth. She offers ideas on how special needs students can be integrated during recess so it does not overwhelm them. Demerath (1994), also discusses how mainstream students sometimes do not take into account the ability of their fellow peers, “ a questionnaire and interview conducted in Britain for example , found that adolescents from an integrated school were more likely than those from a non- integrated school to think that their physically handicapped peers were intelligent , friendly, capable, and approachable” (Demerath,P.W. 1994.). This helps in understanding that not always is it that they do not want to play together it is more about learning about each other first before playing to better understand to enjoy recess together.

Special Education students need the same opportunities as mainstream students, which entitles them to the same breaks as said mainstream students. Special Education students need breaks from learning to help them learn better. Pellegrini (2015) made a similar point when he stated “Break during periods of sustained cognitive work should reduce cognitive interference and maximize learning and achievement gains.” Children need breaks to allow them to think freely and reboot themselves for when they go back into the lesson they will feel refreshed and ready to finish what they learned.

Tests that were studied show how beneficial recess was on early years of education for all students. Kindergartener’s playground social behavior was a significant predictor of their first grade academic achievement, even after taking their kindergarten achievement into consideration

(Pellegrini 2015). The study proved how recess not only benefited the child that year only but prepared them for their next year also. Fourth graders actually start to change their behavior more, where you have to watch the difference between how a girl and boy play. Daris (2015), explains boys are more active on the playground than are girls, and their levels of activity can be increased by previously limiting their opportunity for vigorous physical activity. Even though girls are not using recess to burn energy the same ways boys do, recess still becomes beneficial to how they de- stress themselves from lecture.

### **Why is it an opportunity?**

Children being allowed to go outside after learning a lesson helps keep them on track. For example, Pellegrini (2015) from the article , explains “when students go outside they are freely able to speak how they want without being grammatically correct. Children are able to build their social and cognitive development.” Pellegrini(2015) even goes into detail how much time is helpful for student’s learning during recess time.

Special education students are learning new ways to understand how to feel comfortable around others especially during recess where it is a big part of how students play and learn to communicate with one another. Recess helps promote inclusiveness, because a special education child can learn to play games and help communicate with peers. Special education students having certain disabilities sometimes does not allow them to get the full benefit of recess just because not all teachers understand what the child can or cannot do. Teachers learning the special education students capabilities allows the student to be able to be understood and taught how it is most comfortable for them. The students will also be able to learn how to be social with mainstream students, if the teacher is able to teach the student how to be social based on the student's personality, then it would be much easier for all students to accept each other out in the



recess area. To have recess between special education students and mainstream students, gives great positivity back to students. First off, it allows them to play together and learn. The special education students can learn from the mainstream students ways to communicate differently or the mainstream students can help the special education student mentally without even knowing it just by playing house or jump rope together. The benefit of recess on special education students being able to integrate with other students allows them to not just be around teachers or other students like them, they can be around mainstream students and learn from them, especially in ways that teachers cannot teach them.

### **What should be done?**

Special education students and mainstream students would find that intergroup contact theory would work well, because Allport (1954) states people who work together who are all different can learn to not be prejudiced towards others who are different. VanderMeulen (2016) describes a great way for students to make contact with one another by using the Buddy Bench, it gives students another way to approach students without judgement. Allowing a special education student to go up to a mainstream student on the Buddy Bench and feel comfortable is something all schools should strive for. The Buddy Bench by VanderMeulen (2016) gives special education students a new way for them to communicate, since most times these students are ignored of their own special needs. This is why the Buddy Bench and Eredics (2014) would be two great concepts that would work well together. Eredics (2014) gives ways to help ease special education students integrate into recess, and the Buddy Bench would be very helpful in the ways Eredics explains how to make special education students needs be heard, without overwhelming the student. Wang (2016) is another who helps explain how recess is important and helps explain how to give special needs students a way to integrate with others positively

where all students can understand each other without judgement. Wang (2016), along with Eredics (2014) and Vandermeulen (2016) ideas allows special education students feel welcome and just like everyone else.

While integrating Special needs students with mainstream students it is also very important to understand the special needs students needs first. Lucas and Sturgis (2012) suggest “teachers should respect the physical boundaries of a student who is afraid of germs. Many OCD people who are afraid of germs , become highly agitated when touched.”(Lucas & Sturgis, 2012). A good idea would be to allow a break, “Students should be allowed to take a break from recess activities when it is compounding their symptoms and making them worse.” (Bright Hub Education, 2012). Knowing how all special needs students react to certain outcomes helps insure a safe and fun environment for all.

Besides using those ideas stated above another great way for all students to play together is Playworks. Playworks is a program designed for students to play together in structured games. The program allows the teacher to control how the students play and basically how they can play together. Playwork parent stated:

My 5-year-old twins were diagnosed with autism 3 years ago. If I had to choose one program out of the handful that help with social interaction, it would be Playworks. Playworks immerses our twins into their community. Other children know them and are used to working with them. Playworks helps schools set parameters for all children to help them understand what is OK and what is not. I think all kids need that, but kids with special needs especially need to have that direction. (Tish Playworks Parent, 2017)

“Playworks is designed specifically for the children who have not learned how to play together and now want to play with other students in a safe way.”

In studies showing just what type of recess environment is suitable for certain types of students, it showed a very outdoors type recess structure. (Powell, 2007) It was in the forest and the children were allowed to build whatever they could, which entailed to forts made out of branches or rocks, and dams that blocked little areas of water. This type of recess was available to students that had disabilities like ADHD or ADD. The recess that this school allowed was a way for students to build their own areas where they could be in charge of. Powell (2007), recognized how beneficial it was to these students to have and build something that they could call their own. A special education child at the Lexington Montessori School (LMS) that Powell interviewed about how the fort type style recess is beneficial for them, stated that it gave her a sense of belonging to a small family, and gave her a purpose. She was able to feel comfortable expressing her opinions and let her feel comfortable leading other children her age, in which she would not have felt comfortable at all if this was with adults (Powell, 2007).

In conclusion, children need recess to help them learn socially especially special needs students. Since some already have difficulty communicating basic needs, it is very beneficial for them to go out and enjoy recess. The tips of learning how to understand special needs students and then integrating those needs into ways to help them learn to play with mainstream students will help them boost. Making ways for all students to feel comfortable going up to each other is very helpful in bringing mainstream and special needs students together.

### **Method**

How can all students come together and play safely and be able to learn from each other positively? For this project, the researcher studied how students handle recess, with a particular focus on how to integrate special education students with mainstream students. More

specifically, administrators and teachers were interviewed to learn how to improve the participation of students with special needs in recess opportunities. This is important because it provides an opportunity for students with special needs to interact with mainstream students and vice versa.

### **Context**

Research took place in Mars<sup>1</sup>, California. This city is called “The Salad Bowl of the World,” because the city’s main industry is agriculture. The school that I studied was Mote Baeza which opened in 2013. The school did not start off with the name Mote Baeza, it was originally named after a Mexican Robin Hood who stole from the rich to help the poor. The school’s location is in the east side area of Mars, California, which according to the Californian Newspaper ( 2017), just in the year 2017 alone ,17 of the 27 homicides occurred on the east side of the city. In 2017, out of the 724 students enrolled, 84 are special education students. The school's play area is up to date since the school is fairly new: it has a standard playground with two slides, a rock climbing structure, monkey bars, and a little area where the swings are. There is also a grass area where students can run around and play sports.

### **Participants and Participant Selection**

In this study the researcher interviewed three participants. The participants were two males and one female. The participants’ ages are 42, 30, and 7. The first participant , Mr. B, has been teaching for 10 years including 2 of those years being at Mote Baeza . Ms. W has been a teacher for 3 years at Mote Baeza. Two of the participants are Latino and the other interviewee is Caucasian. The final interviewee is a 7 year old boy who is in Mr. B’s class who plays with us during recess.

### **Researcher**

This topic is meaningful for the researcher because when he was in grade school he was in special education. The researcher was always rejected by mainstream students when he would ask to play with them during recess. Furthermore, the researcher has worked with mainstream students for 4 years and with special education students for 1 year. The researcher has noticed

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and places are pseudonyms.

that mainstream students do not include special education students when they play during recess. Personal qualities that the researcher has is that he has the patience to work with kids, has access to observe students, and communicates with teachers, board members, administrators, and parents.

### **Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions**

1. What do students with special needs do during recess?
2. What do you see as the problem with how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities? OR What are you concerned about when it comes to how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities
3. What is currently being done to improve how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities - by whom - and what do you think about those efforts ? Why?
4. What do you think should be done about how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities?
5. What do you think are the obstacles to changing how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities?
6. Is there anything else that you would like to say about how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities and/or the improvement of how students with special needs take advantage of recess opportunities?

### **Procedure**

All volunteer participants chose whether or not to participate in this research project. If they chose to participate, they had the option to not answer any questions they are uncomfortable with. For the in-depth interviews, they were assured that all names would be changed to protect anonymity. Additionally, all interviews took place in a comfortable manner and in a relaxing situation, where interruptions and distractions were minimized.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data was analyzed for emergent themes.

**Results**

For this Capstone Project, the students, teachers, parents, and administration were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve the integration of Special Education students with mainstream students during recess. This is important because students need that social aspect of playing with different children, and going out of their comfort zone. This will help them as they grow older. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: Reach, Probability of Impact and Time. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

*Evaluation of Action Options*

	Reach	Probability of impact	time
Buddy Bench	Medium	Medium	Low
Play Works	High	High	High
Activities during recess	Medium	Medium	Low

**Activities During Recess**

Special Education students and teachers can find ways to integrate themselves into mainstream recess time. Allowing the students to play with each other benefits the Special Education students greatly. Karen Wang (2013) states “that according to the American Academy of pediatrics, recess is a necessary break in the day for optimizing a child’s social, emotional, physical and cognitive development”.. This is exactly what a special education students need because most students are very antisocial and dislike being around people. Wang (2013), suggests ideas to help the Special Education students make recess less stressful by creating a checklist for recess; this helps the students feel a sense of structure while still having fun. This idea give students who do not feel included a way to be social Locke describes that “children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) often report they have few friends and are disconnected to the social milieu at school” (Locke, Shih, Kretzmann, Kasari 2016). So certain activities can be on the list like playing with one friend one day and the next day, playing on the swing, or catching a bug. Simple tasks allow the students to feel they have an objective, but still have to be out of their comfort zone to perform the task.

### **PlayWorks**

Mr. Bartello a teacher at Mote Baeza describes how Playworks has made a positive impact on one of his Special Education students who was having a rough time during school. He states “since playworks started the student had made new friends, comes to class with a positive attitude and has received less referrals.”(S. Barela,Person Communication, November 6,2017) Playworks allows group fun with other students with different classrooms. It allows the teachers to help facilitate groups playing together like organized play. This has benefitted Barela’s students. As he states, “My student feels more in control because he knows what he is going to do and with who instead of going outside and having to figure out himself.” Barela believes

Playworks heavily impacted his students in a positive way because he did not have to make games up by himself and or have to figure out who to play with. Basically the teacher was able to choose for him and all he had to do was play.

### **Buddy Bench**

Aleah W. Rarcken a Special Education teacher at Mote Baeza describes how her students have difficulty playing with their peers. More specifically, she states that “ A concern I have with my kids during recess is that they don't take advantage of meeting or interacting with kids that are not in our class or Special Day class.” The Buddy Bench (Vandermeulen, 2016) would be suitable for Rarcken’s students because it would give them another way to go and play with other students. Warcken believes her students would benefit from the Buddy Bench. She states, “ my biggest problem is my students” preference of playing with their peers in our class. A few of them have cousins or friends that they play with a few times a week but they generally prefer to play with each other.” The bench can initiate a new friendship if one of those students friends does not show up. Warcken added, “when playmates are not getting along they can utilize the bench to play with someone else for the day instead of leaving the group and playing alone.”

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would recommend group play with all students to be very beneficial to help Special Education students interact with other students. Group play with adults facilitating the games will allow all students to feel comfortable while playing where no form of bullying will be allowed. Some difficulties we may have with implementing group play is convincing all students to play and have games that are enjoyable for all. A potential negative outcome is



teachers wanting to be involved because this group play would probably be during recess or during lecture.

### **Action Documentation and Reflection**

The focus of this Capstone Project was on finding ways to help special education students and mainstream students communicate better. The people I interviewed were two Special Education teachers and one special education student. The action options that emerged were Playworks, activities during recess and the Buddy Bench. The one that I implemented was Playworks, I picked this option because this was the most interaction between students that I had seen.

#### **What did you do?**

For my project I went to Mote Baeza Elementary School and participated in a program called Playworks. This program offers structured alternatives to historically unstructured recess time. Playworks has an online database of games that encourage activity and cooperative play among the students. Playworks involved me playing with groups of students. The games that we played that the program offers are games like Four square, Ship Wrecked, Capture the Flag, Kickball, Magic tag, and Pac man tag. While playing with the students we always made sure there was open communication between all the students. Since my Capstone Project was focussed on special education students, a week before I started doing Playworks I took my time to meet the special education students in their classroom so that I can distinguish them apart from mainstream students. I also informed the SPED teachers that I was going to be doing Playworks with students and I encouraged them to inform their students and staff so they could play with us.

#### **How did you do it?**

We chose games that allowed all the students to be involved and easy for all students to understand. I noticed that not all the games that were necessarily enjoyable to all the students because some students were not able to play based on their abilities. So, I needed to think of games that were easier to follow. The games that I modified for the special education students was playing two square instead of four square, Kickball with just kicking no running, instead of playing those types of tag like Pac man tag and Magic tag, we would just play regular tag. By modifying these games to their ability, this will help their gross motor skills to begin to play at the level of their peers. While Playing these modified types of games with SPED students, it allows us to teach them more hands on instruction.

### **What has been the response or outcome so far?**

The outcome was positive because Playworks helped all the students easily get along or learn to play with one another. I was really surprised how it helped students with not just learning how to play with other students but changing how they do in school overall. I know now how important it is that everyone should introduce themselves first to basically break the ice between all students and help learn all the students names. I noticed that not all students knew each other's names so it made it harder for them to communicate together.

Important next steps are implementing these communication skills that these students learned outside, into the classroom.

### **On Lessons Learned**

From this project, I learned different ways to help students feel a sense of belonging despite their disabilities. I also feel more comfortable teaching a group of students who do not

know each other and I got to show them how to come together to learn and play. I learned that students also feel comfortable to come to me and ask for help, though I always felt I would not be able to make students feel I was approachable because I am a male instructor. What I also learned is that the parents of the students feel assured that their children are left in a safe environment where they are able to communicate and learn how to play safely. What I learned about working toward change is that is difficult. When trying to put out new ideas it is not about just saying it. You really have to have skills in order to organize and speak about it. I learned these ways while I did this project.

### Synthesis Integration

When I began my first semester at California State Monterey Bay, I did not realize how much information, would be available to me for the rest of my educational period. This school has given me many opportunities to help me understand how to be the best at what I want to be for my career.

The first learning outcome is the student is required to be able to understand and think critically about ideals on educational foundations. This learning outcome is acquired by gaining knowledge about pedagogical practices and how you imply it in a live classroom setting. In my EHD 50 class (Introduction of Teaching) that I took at Fresno State, which is the exact replica of LS 277 at CSUMB; I was introduced to the main concepts of the schooling system. EHD 50 has helped me to learn how and why I want to be a teacher. An assignment I did in that class that opened my eyes was when we read a chapter in the book called Practice What You Preach. The chapter was about how important it is for a public teacher to be culturally competent. This chapter reminded me on how rough it was for me when I had to go to an all white school in

Monterey. That year, the teacher gave us a research paper to do and expected all her students to do the research paper just like every year. The teacher assumed that all her students had the resources to complete it, but I did not have the resources. The teacher never bothered to ask me if I needed any resources. I ended up not doing the research paper. This is when I realized that every teacher needs to be culturally competent so that you can help all your students be successful.

The second learning outcome is the diversity and multicultural scholar. The service learning at CSUMB that covered the MLO 2 learning outcome. I fulfilled this learning outcome when I was doing service learning at El Sausal Middle School. The teacher that I worked with did a good job by having a welcoming classroom environment to every student in his classroom. I was able to see the teacher and the students build a bond because I started my service learning the first day of school. The teacher built a bond with his students by getting to know his students in and out the classroom and respecting the diversity in classroom. I was very fortunate to work alongside this very inspirational teacher because I was able to pick up a lot of teaching techniques that I can develop in my future classroom.

The third learning outcome is innovative technology practitioner. The class that fulfilled that learning outcome was LS 400. In this class we were able to use technology effectively, design, and collaboration during my capstone project. We used technology during my capstone paper when looking for research throughout my paper and we used design when making my powerpoint presentation. I did the collaboration part of the MLO 3 by collaborating with two of my classmates during my action project at the elementary school we participated with.

The fourth learning outcome is social justice collaborator. I learned this outcome from my LS 380 course at CSUMB. In this class we learned skills and theories of how to be agents of

change as teachers in their communities. An assignment that I did in this class made me realize that all schools in the same school district are not all provided with an equal amount of resources, only the schools located in the upper class part of town. This is the reason why the lower class part of town gets left out without many resources and do not do as well as the upper class in test scores. When I become a teacher no matter what part of the city I am in, I am going to as many fundraisers that I can to help out the school district by providing funding to school who are in need for resources.

The fifth learning outcome is subject matter generalist. I learned this learning outcome from taking LS 398. In this class I learned a coherent depth of study for successful practice in California public education by doing many projects. One of the projects we did was a recording of us being congress members talking about issues going on in education and how we would come up with a solution that would help fix that issue. I really enjoyed this project.

The necessary next steps that I need to take in order to become the professional that envision myself being is first off finishing this capstone course with positivity, next is taking the necessary tests in order to go into the credential program and making sure to always keep a positive outlook no matter how difficult each step is.

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