

Summary of Dissertation

Community Development Practitioners Methods to Support People with Disabilities

Information from Proposal:

- A review of the literature showed a need for more information/research for people with disabilities to fully access shared resources and social networks within their communities
- The purpose was to explore community development practitioners use of strengths-based methods for people with disabilities in their neighborhoods
- Community Development Practitioners is a broad term to refer to professionals that work with communities or neighborhoods on projects that improve the community
- Research Question: How do community development practitioners *identify* and *provide* methods to support people with disabilities within their communities?

Practitioners/Sample Size: My study was open to the entire US due to the small number of practitioners based on consultation with content experts and my own analysis. A sample of 6 to 12 practitioners was planned with 10 practitioners interviewed to reach saturation with some clustered in different parts of the country.

Results in relation to the Research Question:

Identifying Methods: practitioners discussed their backgrounds and interests in community approaches for people with disabilities that were not based on traditional human services for people with disabilities. Practitioners did not discuss post-secondary education as a primary way that they identified methods to use but focused more on their personal experiences with people with disabilities that encouraged their interest in this work. Additionally, many discussed that their experiences with people with disabilities in their personal lives were more influential than education and experience related to the connecting type of work that they do now.

Providing Methods: Practitioners discussed the importance of forming networks within neighborhoods to better understand the issues to then improve the lives of people with disabilities. Practitioners provided individualized services to people with disabilities that considered their strengths and interests. They spent time listening and then using that

information to identify others in the community or within their own networks who could also connect with people with disabilities. Another method that community practitioners provided was supporting opportunities for reciprocity. Practitioners provided opportunities to remember things about neighbors or friends that were important to them to show reciprocity. Additionally, practitioners explained that they needed to anticipate and understand barriers to provide supports for people with disabilities to be included in their communities.

Highlights from Identified Themes:

- Community development practitioners used strength-based approaches that are focused more on community connections than current practices which are focused on services. Practitioners explained methods that were outside the typical human services delivery system that were individualized to people with disabilities they were working with, but also community-focused, providing a holistic approach that created greater linkages to neighbors and the community.
- In terms of professional connections, practitioners discussed people with disabilities not just serving as clients, but in paid roles that further realigned and shifted their relationships with others.
- Intentional connections with neighbors is needed for people with disabilities that may be known but not necessarily engaged with their neighbors. Practitioners identified opportunities for connections to support this networking. They also identified gifts or talents of people with disabilities to initiate conversations to build relationships and broaden their network.
- Practitioners discussed how members of the general public believe inclusion is about specialized programs rather than community integration, and the difficulty of shifting those perceptions. A practitioner explained that “projects had to be very carefully designed to be impactful” to not reinforce the charity model so often associated with people with disabilities.

How do Findings Relate to the Literature?

- Shifting human services models to clarify their role in inclusion and focusing on connecting with community is important for increased social capital.
- Many of the barriers for people with disabilities that practitioners described aligned with those found in the literature including transportation, employment, and community acceptance.

- People with disabilities in the US have limited volunteer experiences and the opportunities available to them do not mirror those open to the general public so creating other opportunities like some practitioners discussed with professional roles could address this.

How do Findings Relate to Social Capital?

- Social capital has recently been used as a framework for increasing social connections for people with disabilities, and findings show that strengths-based approaches can impact social capital through expanding social networks, bonding and bridging social capital, and reciprocity.
- Increasing social networks can be of great value to people with disabilities, as it truly makes them a part of the community. To increase social capital, people with disabilities cannot just share physical space with the broader community. In segregated settings, people with disabilities have networks with their disabled peers, but these ties do not advance their social capital, as there are limited resources within that network. Additionally, as a participant explained, when human services organizations arrange for people with disabilities to volunteer as a group, it is the organization that gets the credit and receives positive connections, therefore not advancing the network for those people with disabilities participating.
- Practitioners connected individuals with disabilities to neighbors or people within their community that they had not met before. Many of the practitioners also mentioned connections that could be described as increasing bridging social capital for people with disabilities. Bridging social capital is formed when one goes outside their initial network of family and friends to create bonds.
- An interview question specifically involved reciprocity since it is not clearly defined. Opportunities for people with disabilities to gain social capital through reciprocity are lacking, as they are perceived as only being recipients of acts of charity. One practitioner explained a situation where a person with a disability wanted to have a fundraiser for the local fire department and many community members assumed the fundraiser was for that individual. Several practitioners gave specific examples of individual reciprocity or a general sense of community connection that allowed for reciprocity to occur. A practitioner described a crisis situation within their organization where people with disabilities supported staff and other people with disabilities through the situation. Overall, the value of being in community with people with disabilities and relationships built was emphasized as a form of reciprocity.

Limitations of the Study

- While I interviewed a total of 10 practitioners, many were clustered in geographical areas. This may limit the replication of results to broader areas, but it may also show that strengths-based approaches are clustered in areas where other similar activities take place or approaches have been modeled.

Recommendations & Conclusions

- Social capital provides a framework to increase community connections for people with disabilities and those connections benefit everyone in the community.
- There are numerous programs in the United States (US) that provide services and supports for people with disabilities with significant costs and poor outcomes. Medicaid waivers fund services for individuals through eligibility criteria and do not fund community initiatives. Several practitioners alluded to funding as an issue, but specifics were not discussed. Further research on effective funding systems to successfully connect people with disabilities to their communities could lead to increased integration.
- Additional research regarding people with disabilities in community development projects that included everyone (not just specific to people with disabilities) would be beneficial to human services professionals as well as community development practitioners. I originally expected to interview practitioners rooted in community development who worked on a variety of projects not specific to disability. However, the practitioners that I did interview were focused within disability human services or community connecting. Many discussed practices like Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) or similar approaches that were not disability specific that are used by community development practitioners. Also, in reviewing books and materials from the community development sector, none provided examples with people with disabilities. Increased participation of people with disabilities in activities in their communities can lead to greater social capital for everyone.
- Additional research that included interviewing people with disabilities about their experiences accessing social capital and their community would add tremendous value to the field.