Abstract: Although participation in extracurricular activities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities has been advocated, a limited number of students appear to be involved in such activities. Further, there is little empirical research on how extracurricular activities are valued, supported, and encouraged. This study surveyed a sample of special educators across five states to learn about their opinions regarding extracurricular activities. As reported in other research, the findings confirm that few students participated in these activities; few parents requested these services for their children; and few teachers believed that planning them is their responsibility, despite the fact that they thought these activities were of value and provided several benefits. The implications of these findings are discussed.

The purpose and value of inclusive education has been well extolled by researchers. McDonnell and Hunt (2014) argue that inclusive school communities provide students with ongoing and structured opportunities to promote membership and achievement for all students, recognize all student accomplishments (typical students and students with support needs), and provide contexts for all students to be valued and respected. Furthermore, inclusive education provides students with disabilities a supportive environment to access the general education (Ryndak, Moore, Orlando, & Delano, 2010), interact with and establish social networks with typical peers (McDonnell & Hunt, 2014), achieve desired learning outcomes (McDonnell, et al., 2003), and receive instruction from highly qualified teachers (Copeland, Keefe, Calhoun, Tanner, & Park, 2011). In all, inclusive education provides a potentially rich and supportive environment in which students can learn, develop, connect, and build community.

An assumption regarding an inclusive school is that it provides a variety of contexts and experiences for students to learn and develop positive relationships with other students. Typically, there is a sequence of well-structured instructional and social activities in which students are engaged in meaningful (and, hopefully, enjoyable) tasks. But at the end of a given day, these activities are curtailed. Regrettably, many students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are socially isolated, with few friends or social activities outside of school (Chung, Carter, & Sisco, 2012; Kemp & Carter, 2002; Sheppard-Jones, Prout, & Kleinert, 2002). For example, Wagner, Cadwallader, Garza, and Cameto (2002) reported that parent interview findings revealed that 17% of children with intellectual
disability and 32% of children with autism had never visited with friends outside of school during the previous year, and 50% of children with intellectual disability and 81% of children with autism never or very infrequently received telephone calls from friends. In this respect, the end of the school day may serve as an antecedent to the student’s continued social isolation and alienation—a situation all committed educators seek to correct. This is a regrettable situation, but limited research has been done to determine why this is occurring or what can be done to ameliorate this situation.

Carter, Swedeen, Moss, and Pesko (2010) reflected that “the most memorable and enjoyable experiences from high school” for many students was their participation in extracurricular activities (p. 275). Extracurricular activities can potentially provide students with a wealth of positive experiences: opportunities to engage in sports and other recreational activities with friends, pursue preferred interests (e.g., clubs, music groups), be involved in and plan social events, and make new friends and socially network, among others. Such active engagement may add much to a student’s school experience and allow him or her to feel connected to a community. As noted by Shogren (in press), students with intellectual disability value a sense of belonging and a positive school culture—they want to be included in “everything” at their respective schools.

The value of extracurricular activities has recently begun to receive more attention (Chung et al., 2012; Kleinert, Miracle, & Sheppard-Jones, 2007; Pence & Dymond, 2015). Participation in these activities allow students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to explore and identify personal interests and preferences; to practice academic, functional, and social skills learned during the day; to develop and refine social relationships; to respond to opportunities to develop and apply self-determination and self-advocacy skills; and, most importantly, to feel like a valued member of the school community (Kleinert et al., 2007; Pence & Dymond, 2015). It goes without saying that a primary goal of school is to encourage and support acceptance (Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, & Goetz, 1994). Extracurricular activities provide a means in which the values and relationships shared and promoted during the day receive additional support and reinforcement—a continued experience of belonging. Although most inclusion research has focused on general education classroom settings, student involvement in extracurricular activities represents an authentic extension of inclusive practice, albeit in a different choice of settings. If, as McDonnell and Hunt (2014) suggest, the intent of education is to support students’ personal growth and development, extracurricular activities serve this purpose well. They provide students with additional opportunities to practice new and acquired skills in a natural setting with natural occurring reinforcement.

Because there is general agreement that extracurricular activities represent valued school practices, the U. S. Department’s Office for Civil Rights has mandated under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that school districts must offer equal access to extracurricular activities to students with disabilities and provide, as necessary, appropriate accommodations and modifications. Refusal to provide such services is in violation of a student’s rights; however, the number of parents who are aware of this right is open to question.

Additionally, participation in extracurricular activities provides a meaningful measure of social acceptance and involvement in inclusive practices (Mahoney, Cairns, & Farmer, 2003). Schools that make committed efforts to encourage, recruit, and support students with intellectual and developmental disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities have available to them compelling evidence that they are accepting of all students and value the contributions of all participants.

Nevertheless, despite current interest in promoting extracurricular activities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, available research suggests that few students with intellectual disabilities do indeed participate. For example, based on National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 data, Wagner et al. (2004) reported that only 33% of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities participated in any extracurricular activities. Further, Simeonsson, Carlson, Huntington, McMillen, and Brent (2001) indicated that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, when compared to students with other disabilities, participated
far less in these activities. Last, Powers et al. (2005) reported that only 11% of IEPs in a sample included any reference to extracurricular activities.

A number of reasons have been suggested to explain this failure. As described by Carter et al. (2010), these include: lack of activities, lack of transportation, ignorance about school activities, lack of teacher and/or administrative support, limited and/or challenging social and communication skills, student lack of interest, and lack of parent support. Failure to participate in extracurricular activities may also be exacerbated by the fact that the students may not be placed in their neighborhood schools, which may cause further alienation and lack of friendships, and, specifically, lack of supports at extracurricular activities (Hughes & Carter, 2008).

Despite increased attention to the need to provide extracurricular activities for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, the research about student involvement in extracurricular activities remains limited. In particular, there is little research about its perceived value by teachers and the extent to which such participation is included in IEPs. If such involvement is included in IEPs, what information is provided? Do teachers regard planning extracurricular activities their responsibility? To address these questions, we conducted a survey, which involved a sample of teachers across five states. Our intent was to better understand the opinions of teachers regarding extracurricular activity and what role they believed they had in planning and supporting these activities. We also wanted to determine the types of extracurricular activities students with intellectual and developmental disabilities participated in and the types of support they were provided.

Method

Participants

A sample of K-12 special education teachers who served students with intellectual and developmental disabilities from a mix of rural, urban, and suburban environments across five states served as participants for the investigation. Most of the teachers served students with significant needs (i.e., were given alternate assessments). The researchers obtained Institutional Review Board approval prior to recruitment of participants and survey distribution. To recruit participants, the researchers invited a selective sample of special education directors from school districts in Connecticut, South Carolina, Virginia, Washington, and Wyoming. Purposively, the researchers used preexisting contacts to select a mix of small and large districts.

Survey Instrument

Using the Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap, 2015) software, a survey originally created and used by Kleinert et al. (2007) to measure teachers’ opinions related to extracurricular activities for students was utilized with slight modifications in the current study. The survey included 13 questions. The questions included: how often did their students participate in extracurricular activities; what type of support they received when they participated; were extracurricular activities included in IEPs; what types of activities did they participate in; what were the benefits of participation; and what barriers existed that prevented their involvement? The REDCap system helped researchers to develop and securely deliver web-based surveys. The modifications to the survey included adding additional demographic questions related to the teachers’ experience. For example, one item requested information related to the years of educational work, and another asked if the teacher taught a group of students participating in a state alternative assessment program. Email addresses were gathered to verify the uniqueness of each participant. A small pilot sample was conducted at a single school district. The pilot study yielded feedback that was used to improve the survey delivery system and the wording of a few questions. Descriptive data were calculated to report the findings.
mation and informed consent. After receiving the consent of the participant, the computer administered the REDCap survey.

Results

Participants

The original sample \((n = 153)\) included a range of individuals, including special education teachers (96%), related service providers (1.3%), and paraprofessionals (1.3%), who work with students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. However, given our interest in examining opinions of teachers regarding extracurricular activities and, especially, the roles that they believed they had in supporting these activities, we limited our analysis to participants who self-identified as serving in the role of special education teachers \((n = 146)\). Over half of the special education teachers indicated that their primary caseload consisted of students who were eligible for alternate assessments \((n = 80, 52\%)\), and less than half \((n = 68, 44\%)\) reported that their students were eligible for standard assessments with accommodation. A few responding teachers \((n = 4, 2.6\%)\) indicated a primary caseload of students eligible for standard assessment. Teacher experience ranged from 1-42 years \((mean = 16 years; SD = 10.6)\).

Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Table 1 represents participation of students in extracurricular activities. The majority \((62%\) and \(52\%,\) respectively) of teachers reported that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities rarely participated in either school-based extracurricular activities or in community recreation or social activities. The largest single reported school activity was sports \((69\%)\), followed by Special Olympics, clubs, music, social activities and 4H clubs, respectively. However, when teachers were asked to rank order the in-school activities based on frequency of participation, the majority \((42\%)\) indicated that their students participated more often in activities other than the six included in this survey. As noted in Table 1, the second most frequently utilized in-school activity was Special Olympics \((32.5\%)\), followed by sports, social activities, music, clubs, and 4H, respectively.

Teachers generally agreed that although their students’ participation is important, they were not in the position to monitor after-school activities as part of their responsibilities. One teacher noted: “It occurs beyond the school day. I do support the activities, but don’t think you can require teachers to do so.” However, the teacher added that teachers could get involved in extracurricular activities on a volunteer basis “only if the teacher is willing to do this type of volunteer work.” Also, the teacher mentioned that teachers could get involved in planning for extracurricular activities, even if that teacher was not the person carrying out the plan. As the teacher commented: “certainly offering recommendations along with researching options is part of the team process.”

When teachers were asked how often a student and/or his or her parent or guardian had expressed an interest in participating in extracurricular activities (either at an IEP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>At Least 1 Student Participates (%)</th>
<th>Rank Order of Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sports</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>69.3</td>
<td>30.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>46.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>44.4</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social activities</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4H clubs</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Olympics</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>51.6</td>
<td>22.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15.0</td>
<td>41.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
meeting or another time), the majority (47.7%) reported that students and parents rarely expressed an interest in such activities (see Figure 1). Furthermore, the teachers indicated that students or parents sometimes (22.2%), regularly (15.7%), or frequently (5.9%) expressed an interest in extracurricular activities. Additionally, 73.9% of the teachers included in this study reported that typical peers or buddies (those without disabilities) rarely or never expressed an interest in inviting a student with an intellectual disability to participate in extracurricular activities. Similarly, the majority (68.6%) of the teachers indicated that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities rarely or never expressed an interest in inviting peers without disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities.

Perceived Value of Extracurricular Activities

Descriptive analysis showed that the majority of special education teachers did not feel that planning for or monitoring extracurricular considerations was part of their job description. More than half (74%) selected “No” in response to the question, “Do you see planning and monitoring of extracurricular activities as your responsibility?” compared to the 26% who said it was their responsibility.

Information about Activities in IEPs

When asked what information was provided when extracurricular activities were included in IEPs, 45% reported describing the type of activity, 21% said the type of support provided, 16% stated the amount of time per week, and 10% indicated whether the activity was listed as a measurable instructional goal.

Encouraging Participation in Extracurricular Activities

Teachers indicated that they encouraged participation in extracurricular activities for a number of reasons (see Figure 2). Many ranked promoting social skill development (46.3%), promoting social acceptance by peers (43.9%), and encouraging self-determination (38.8%) as the most important reasons for including extracurricular activities in students’ IEPs. On the other hand, 56.2% of the teachers ranked IEP requirements as the least important reason for including extracurricular activities in student IEPs. Additionally, several teachers acknowledged the potential benefits associated with participation in extracurricular activities (see Figure 3). The most important benefits associated with participation in extracurricular activities included: practicing social communication and functional skills (56.3%), improving quality of life (51%), facilitating acceptance into community (40.5%), and making new friends (40.3%). However, improving academic skills (27.2%) was ranked as the least important benefit of participation in extracurricular activities.

Obstacles to Participation

Participants in this study were asked to rank order potential barriers to participation in extracurricular activities for students with disabilities. The most frequently mentioned barriers
included lack of transportation (49.7%), lack of opportunity, and lack of student and parent interest. Conversely, the least frequently mentioned barrier was resistance from or lack of support from general educators and/or administrators.

**Discussion**

This study attempted to explore the degree to which students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are included in ex-

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Figure 2. Teachers’ Rankings of Reasons to Promote Extracurricular Activities.
extracurricular activities in their school and home communities. A survey was used to collect information from special educators in five states across the U.S. to determine the degree to which students with ID are included in school- and community-based activities after school hours. There are some limitations to this study that should be acknowledged prior to discussing the implications of these findings.

One of the limitations of this study is that the information collected is the self-report of individuals, with no opportunity to verify the accuracy of the information provided. Furthermore, because we used a web-based survey, we were unable to estimate the respondent pool sample size and consequent response rate. Nevertheless, we believe the number of completed responses received was adequate for analysis. Despite the missing data regarding the sample size, the use of web-based surveys do provide several advantages such as eliminating geographic boundaries, increasing the potential sample size, and increasing participant anonymity (Gosling, Vazire, Srivastava, & John, 2004). Another limitation of this study was the purposeful sampling method used rather than a completely random sample (i.e., the survey was initially sent to directors of special education, who then forwarded to teachers who serve students with intellectual and developmental disabilities). Although we specifically asked the directors to forward the survey to teachers of students with severe disabilities, we do not know what criteria they used to identify potential respondents; hence, there may be great variability in the directors’ perceptions regarding students with severe disabilities. The researchers were also limited in their ability to recruit a completely random sample by the research policies of local school districts and district administrators who wanted to review the proposed research protocol to determine whether they would agree to share the opportunity to participate in the study with the special educators in their individual district. These special educators self-selected to participate, and so their characteristics and, in particular, their views about the participation of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities in extracurricular activities might be different from the views of a randomly selected population. Furthermore, we did not ask the respondents to specify the characteristics of the students that they served, and so there may be great variability here, too.

An additional limitation is that we did not
disaggregate data relative to gender, ethnicity, or socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic background of the respondents or the students that they served. These differences may shape responses and future research is needed to better understand their influence on survey responses. Differences across grade levels were analyzed but proved to be insignificant; nevertheless, further research on the relationship between extracurricular activities and grade level is warranted.

Last, the intent of this study was to obtain input from teachers. Consequently, input was not obtained from students or parents. Our justification to ask only teachers was based on our confidence that they would be cognizant of the students’ involvement in extracurricular activities and willing to provide input. That said, students and/or their parents would of course know best about their or their children’s participation in extracurricular activities, and such research is needed.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study provide information that expands our knowledge about student participation in extracurricular activities, which has implications for practice, policy, and future research. As stated earlier, this study used a slightly modified version of the Kleinart et al. (2007) study that collected information from special educators in one state. Their study found that students with moderate to severe disabilities were more likely to participate in community-based afterschool activities, including church youth groups, than in school-based ones. They also found that transportation, lack of parental support/resources, lack of opportunities, and student support needs were identified as challenges to student participation in extracurricular activities. Although the intent of the present study was not to compare our findings to those reported by Kleinert et al. (2007), the respondents in this study also reported similar participation patterns and similar barriers to student participation.

One particularly noteworthy finding from this study is that participating special educators held strong beliefs regarding the benefits of participation in extracurricular activities, yet they also held equally firm beliefs that it is not their responsibility to facilitate access to this component of the general education curriculum. Furthermore, they held this belief despite the ruling of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights that school districts must ensure access to extracurricular activities for students with disabilities and must provide appropriate accommodations to support their participation. This discrepancy has important policy implications for our field: What must school districts do to ensure access? What kinds of supports are sufficient to facilitate the participation of students with ID in extracurricular activities? And if these supports are provided, how does that impact current barriers to participation including “lack of transportation,” “lack of opportunity,” and “lack of parent support/resources”?

Implications for Research

This survey provides a starting point for research designed to explore participation in extracurricular activities by students with ID. This study expanded on the original study by Kleinart et al. (2007) by extending participation of special educators beyond one state. We do not claim that the sample in the present study represents a national sample, but suggest that our inclusion of respondents across several states contributes to the emerging evidence that few students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are participating in extracurricular activities, despite the clear benefits of such participation. Future studies could focus on collecting qualitative data from a range of participants to provide more detailed information about the current state of participation, as well as barriers and facilitators of participation in extracurricular activities. For example, it would be important to determine the nature of parent and student interest in these activities, as well as what they believe would be sufficient supports and services that would facilitate participation. As the IEP process was developed to facilitate an interdisciplinary approach to educational planning, it would seem to be a natural fit to use the IEP process to plan access to extracurricular activities that are part of the educational experiences available at school. However, participants described minimal information about extracurricular activities being included in student IEPs. If special educators do not view their responsibilities as including planning and organizing student involvement in
extracurricular activities, it makes sense that this would not become part of the discussion during educational planning meetings. In this respect, we found it a bit surprising that special educators did not view administrators or general educators as barriers to the participation of students with ID in extracurricular activities. More information about why that was the case is needed as a number of hypotheses could result in this outcome. Since participation in Special Olympics was the most common extracurricular activity identified for this group of students, one possible explanation could be that extracurricular involvement for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities still is viewed as involvement in separate rather than inclusive activities in schools and/or communities, hence general educators did not participate in this planning. A more positive hypothesis, however, could be that students with intellectual and developmental disabilities were viewed as members of the school community so that participation in extracurricular activities was not unexpected or unattainable. A third possible explanation could be that other barriers to participation were so significant that the views of general educators and/or administrators were inconsequential. Clearly, more information is needed to gain a clearer understanding of the barriers to participation so that strategies to overcome the barriers can be identified and evaluated.

Finally, research on extracurricular involvement for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities should address the overall impact of participation in various activities. For the general population, participation in extracurricular activities is highly valued for the social and interpersonal skills that are developed and refined (Gardner, Roth, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008; Mahoney, Larson, & Eccles, 2005). Likewise, for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, it is believed that involvement in these activities is essential for developing skills that will improve postschool success including establishing friendships, increasing community engagement, and improving the overall quality of life (Heward, 2006; Modell & Valdez, 2002). Also, extracurricular activities can provide opportunities to improve academic skills through hands-on learning programs. However, despite these claims of positive impact, there are very few research studies that have systematically examined whether they have the intended outcome.

Clearly, U.S. educational policy has guided schools to provide access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities, including students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Yet, the focus on teaching academic content may have redirected the focus of educators away from addressing the non-academic learning needs, such as social skills and self-determination of students with and without disabilities. This is all in spite of research showing students with intellectual and developmental disabilities are frequently socially isolated with limited social networks (Chung, et al., 2012; Kemp & Carter, 2002; Sheppard-Jones et al., 2002). While it may not be practical to fit this more functional skill development into the school day, there may be an under-utilized opportunity to address these learning goals through supporting participation in extracurricular activities. We encourage further research to determine whether this is a viable option, and whether it will have the anticipated positive impact on the lives of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

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