



Development of a Reverse Inclusion Buddy Program to Enhance Social Participation Among Early Elementary Students

Elizabeth C. Cameron, OTD Student; Chris Eidson, PhD, OTR/L, FAOTA
Department of Occupational Therapy | University of Alabama at Birmingham
Alexa Radke, SPE Teacher | Northport Elementary School

Introduction

- Students with disabilities have fewer opportunities for peer engagement (~9% less than peers).
- Social participation is critical for communication, cooperation, and friendship development.
- Reverse inclusion: typically developing peers join special education classrooms to promote engagement
- SBOTs design programs embedding social skills in meaningful, authentic classroom activities.
- Theoretical framework: PEOP mode (Person-Environment-Occupation) + Tier 2 RTI (small group peer interventions)

Methods

- Site: Northport Elementary, K-2 special education classroom
- Participants: 1 student with disabilities (SE01) + 1 peer buddy (PB01); 4 teacher/staff; 2 parents
- Program: 6-week buddy program, hands-on/play-based activities (e.g., color by number, ABC matching)
- Phases:
 - Formative evaluation: refine objectives, prepare materials (Weeks 1-3)
 - Process Evaluation: track enrollment, attendance, observations, staff feedback (Weeks 4-11)
 - Preliminary Outcome Evaluation: observations and surveys (Weeks 11-13)

Results

- Participation: SE01 attended 5/6 sessions (90%)
- Social outcomes: increased turn taking, cooperative play, initiative in interactions
- Teacher feedback: program well- organized, observed SE01 gains in confidence and engagement
- Parent feedback: children enjoyed program; observed improved communication, empathy

Discussion

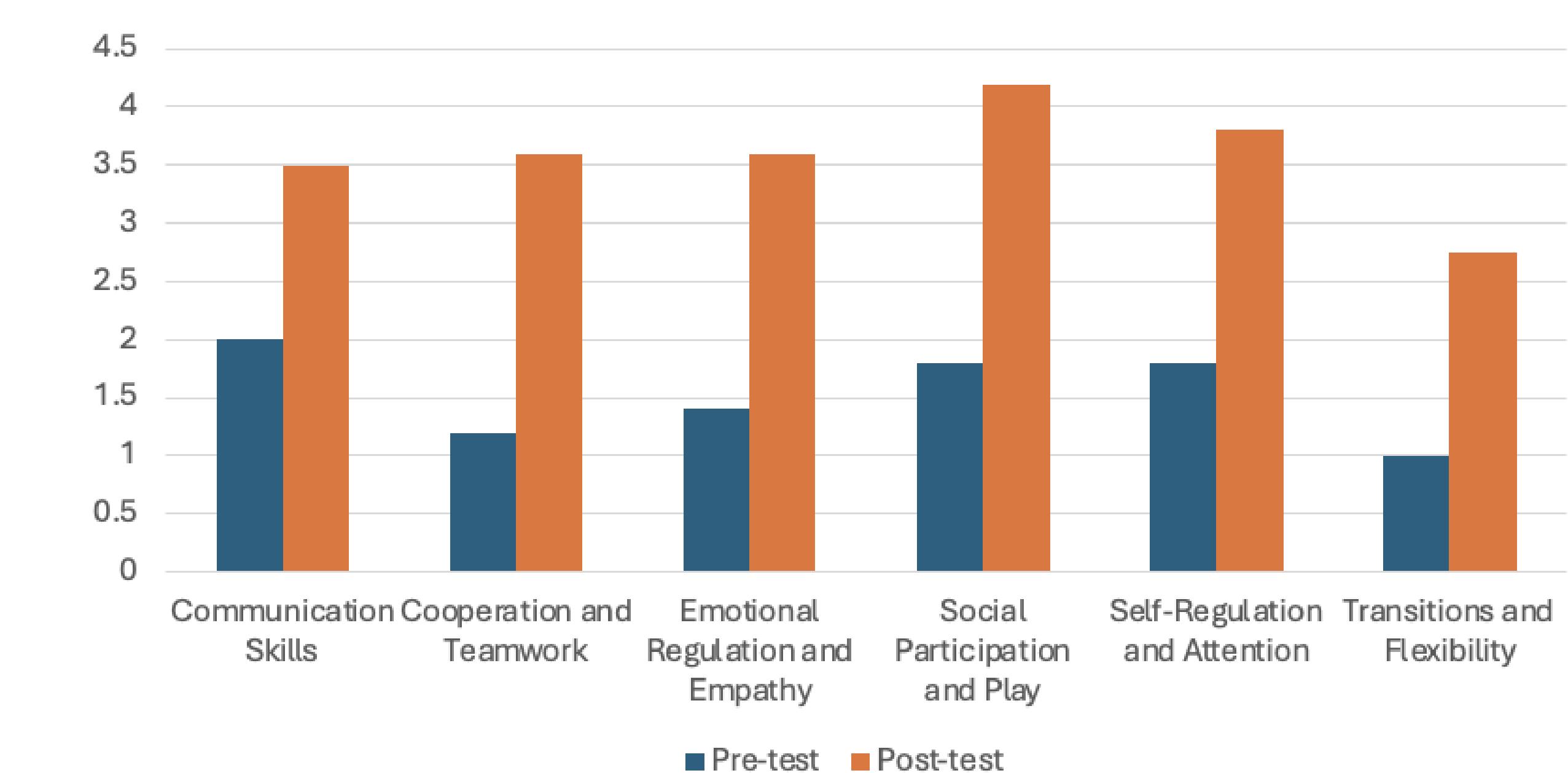
- Reverse inclusion promotes social participation, peer engagement, and inclusion in small group settings.
- Environmental-centered interventions support skill development more effectively than deficit-focused approaches.
- Peer buddies model positive social behaviors; SBOTs support teachers in program delivery.
- Program strengths: structured, hands-on activities, supportive environment, feasible in classroom
- Limitations: small sample size, short duration

Conclusion

- Reverse inclusion buddy program promotes social skills and peer engagement for students with and without disabilities
- Supports OT collaboration with teachers to embed social participation in classroom activities
- Future steps: expand peer pairs, increased frequency of sessions

Survey Question	Summary of Responses	Example/Notes
Planning and organization	3 "Excellent", 1 "Good"	—
Activities developmentally appropriate	All "Yes, completely"	—
Challenges in pairing students	Mostly none; minimal in one case	General education teachers flexible; pairings worked well
Observed social interaction improvements	3 "Some improvement", 1 "Significant improvement"	—
Changes in communication skills of students with disabilities	1 "Significant improvement", 3 "Some improvement"	—
Most engaging activities	Color by number, ABC matching, hands-on activities	Students excited to share work
Least engaging activities	Letter or ABC bingo	SE01 initially resistant; improved after repeated sessions
Typically developing student response	All "Very positive"	—
Changes in peer attitudes (e.g., inclusiveness, empathy)	2 "Few changes", 2 "Many changes"	Examples: increased patience, cooperative behavior, following peer suggestions
Main program strengths	Predictable structure, hands-on activities, supportive environment	Special education teacher involvement highlighted
Recommendations for future implementation	Slightly larger group sizes, increase participants	—
Program expansion or modification	2 "Expand", 2 "Expand with modifications"	—
Additional comments	Program integrated smoothly into classroom	Supported peer modeling, flexibility, engagement, and did not detract from core learning time

SE01



References

Christiansen, C. (2015). Occupational Therapy (4th ed.). Slack Incorporated. <https://www-r2library-com.uab.idm.oclc.org/Resource/Title/1617110507>

Koegel, R. L., Kim, S., & Koegel, L. K. (2014). Training Paraprofessionals to Improve Socialization in Students with ASD. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 44(9), 2197–2208. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-014-2094-x>

Koller, D., Stoddart, K. Approaches that address social inclusion for children with disabilities: a critical review. *Child Youth Care Forum* 50, 679–699 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-020-09589-8>

Smythe, T., Chen, S., Rotenberg, S., Unger, M., Miner, E., Seghers, F., Servili, C., & Kuper, H. (2024). Do children with disabilities have the same opportunities to play as children without disabilities? Evidence from the multiple indicator cluster surveys in 38 low and middle-income countries. *EClinicalMedicine*, 67, 102361–102361. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eclim.2023.102361>

Acknowledgement & Contact Information

SPECIAL THANKS TO: Alexa Radke, SPE teacher & site mentor
CONTACT INFO: Elizabeth C. Cameron, eccam@uab.edu