



# 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

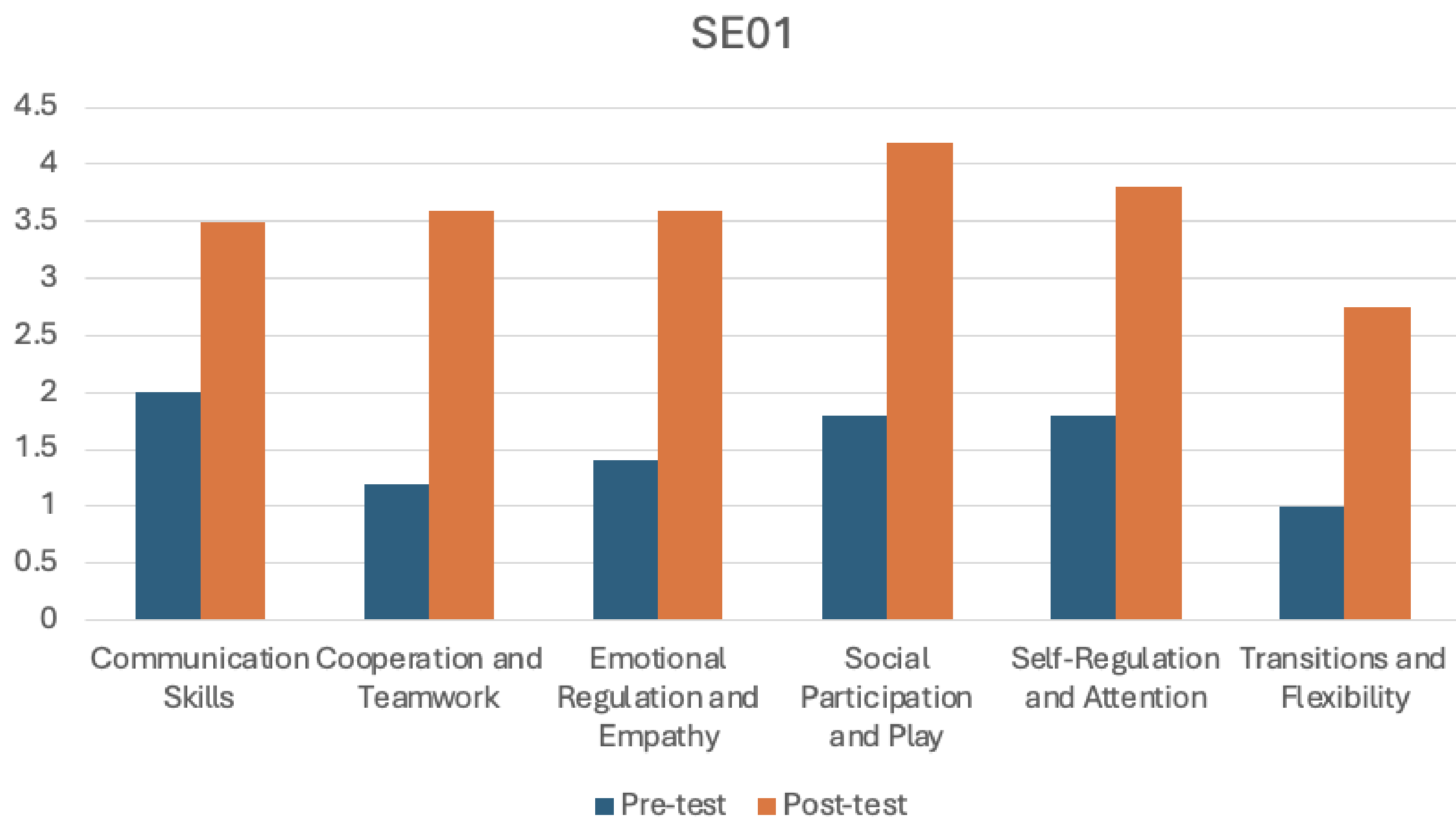
## Discussion

- 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



## 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.eclinm.2023.102361>

## Acknowledgement & Contact information

**SPECIAL THANKS TO:** Alexa Radke, SPE teacher & site mentor  
**CONTACT INFO:** Elizabeth C. Cameron, [eccam@uab.edu](mailto:eccam@uab.edu)