



Staff and Volunteer Training in Religious Education for Children with Disabilities

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Introduction

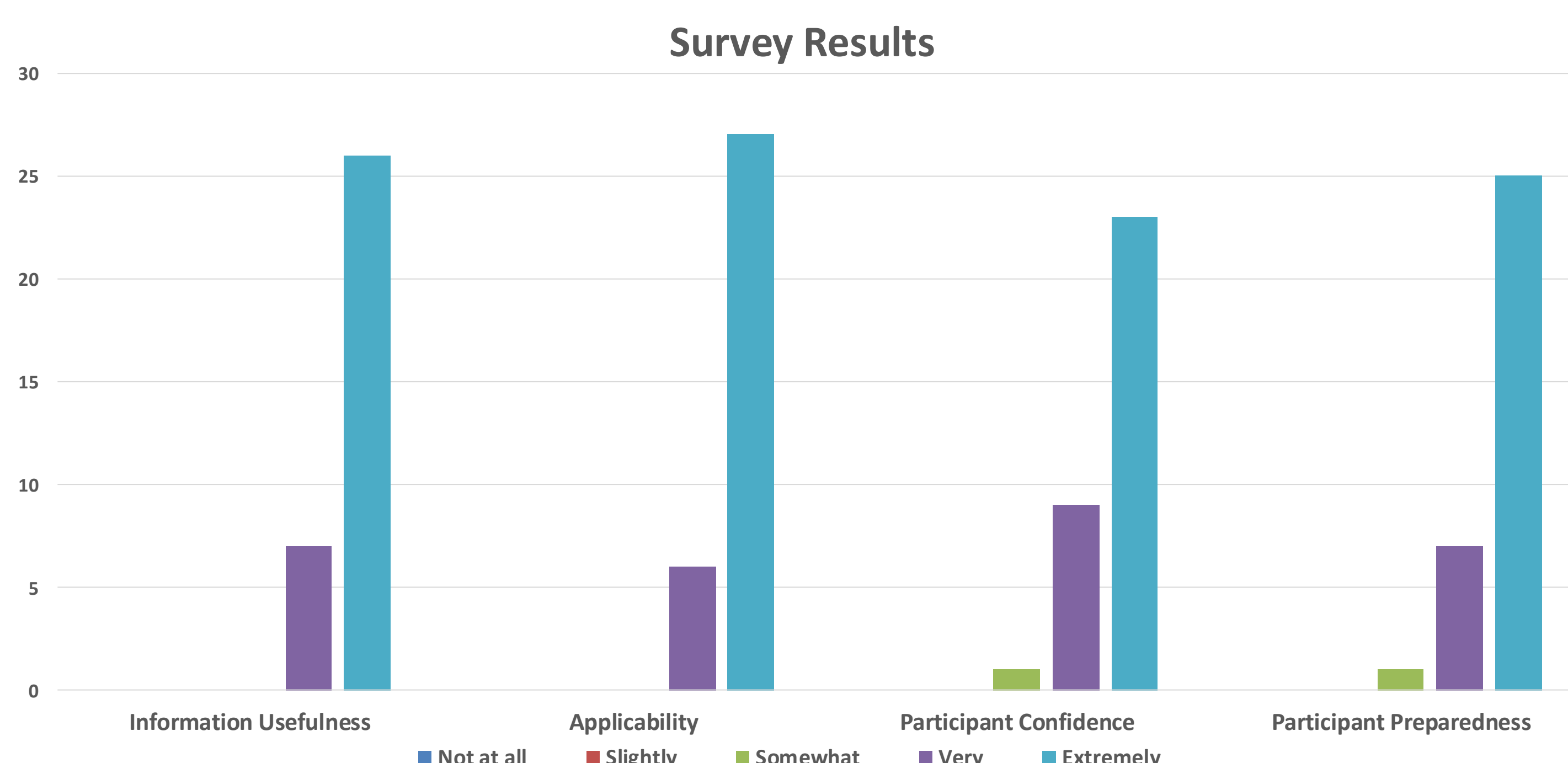
- Nearly 80% of Americans value spirituality, however, children with disabilities and their families face exclusion and feel a lack of support in religious settings (Williams-Reade et al., 2019; Ault et al., 2013).
- This leads to parents of children with disabilities not attending religious services or preventing their child from attending religious activities (Ault et al., 2013).
- Religious and spiritual expression is an instrumental activity of daily living (IADL), making this issue relevant to the OT scope (AOTA, 2020).
- Individuals have the right to inclusive participation regardless of setting according to the principle of occupational justice (AOTA, 2020).
- Children's ministry leaders and volunteers feel unequipped as they receive little to no training on supporting children with disabilities (Carter, 2016).
- Children with disabilities should not be prohibited from engaging in spiritual practices which could bring them satisfaction and meaning to daily life.
- Parents value a welcoming attitude, additional support (e.g., one-on-one assistance), accessible materials, and accessible facilities to enhance their child's participation (Ault et al., 2013).
- **Project Purpose:** to design and implement a program with education and resources for church staff to support the inclusion of children with disabilities in religious settings.

Methods

- **Phase 1:** After collaboration with the children's ministry staff to refine needs of students with disabilities, a program was created with finalized program objectives, revised topics, and a completed training manual.
- **Phase 2:** Information was sent out regarding an in-person training session to educate staff and volunteers using the training manual. This session took place at Redeemer Community Church. Individuals who attended the session also had a chance to ask questions for clarification and further knowledge.
- **Phase 3:** A survey was given to participants to gather feedback on the usefulness of the information, applicability, perceived confidence, and perceived preparedness following the training. Program developer met one-on-one with the children's ministry director to ensure full comprehension of the manual was met prior to completion of the capstone project.

Results

- 40 staff and volunteers participated in the 60-minute in-person training session.
- Education topics included *The Buddy System* (1:1 support model), Disability Etiquette and Respectful Language, Practical Inclusion Strategies, Sensory Room and Sensory Box Use, and How to Handle Challenging Situations.
- 32 participants signed up to serve as a "buddy" volunteer following the training and completed the post-training survey.
- 78.8% of the 32 found the information from the training *extremely useful*
- 81.8% reported the training content was *extremely useful* to their church's ministry and specific needs
- 69.7% reported they feel *extremely confident* supporting an individual with disabilities after the in-person training.
- 75.8% reported feeling *extremely prepared* following this in-person training.



Discussion

Survey Responses & Training Manual Completion

- Most of the participants reported that the information presented in the training was useful, applicable to the needs of their church, and their confidence and preparedness increased to support individuals with disabilities in their volunteer and staff roles, showing the implementation of this program was important.
- Findings also imply the training manual effectively addressed a significant gap in disability-related knowledge and education among church staff and volunteers.
- Results highlight the effectiveness of a practical, occupation-based training approach in non-traditional settings, like religious organizations.

Discussion cont.

- OTPs are uniquely equipped to address barriers to participation within community and non-traditional settings, such as churches.
- This project emphasizes OT's role as both educators and consultants by equipping non-specialized individuals (church staff and volunteers) with strategies to help remove barriers to spiritual expression and participation.
- This project brings awareness to the need for OTPs to advocate and implement *Universal Design for Learning* principles in community and faith-based settings to create environments and activities that are beneficial to all people.

Conclusion

Limitations

- Short timeframe to promote in-person training and collect survey responses
- Potential for self-selection bias: there is a possibility the participants had pre-existing knowledge of the information presented in the training and had a previous positive attitude toward working with individuals with disabilities.
- The data was self-reported, posing the risk of survey responses that align with desires of the religious setting or researcher.
- A baseline measurement of participants' knowledge and confidence was not obtained before the training.
- The project was conducted in a single church community, which could have affected the generalizability of the results.

Future Directions

- Incorporation of pre- and post-training surveys to measure participant growth in a more accurate manner than post-training surveys alone.
- Qualitative interviews or observational methods could be used to provide further information on how volunteers and staff members carryover the information from the training material to classroom implementation over time.

References

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Acknowledgement & Contact information

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