I had my placement in “the Club Inclusion.” Club Inclusion is an NGO and registered charity with its main location at 2652 Joseph Howe Dr, Halifax, NS. However, they do have two locations. The second location is in Dartmouth, 70 King St at Grace United Church. The St James Anglican Church location has had their ‘Drop In Club’ with regular daily activities for over 12 years now. My experiences are exclusive to the Joseph Howe Club location as I ended up spending my placement there. However, I think it is important to keep in mind there are two locations as both have different staff who work different days at the locations and different programming is conducted at each location. Sometimes a program may only be run at one of the locations, Halifax or Dartmouth.

I enjoyed my time at Club. I loved getting to connect with the clients and all the other people who worked there and those who dropped by. My co-workers and most of the staff were friendly and welcoming. Justin McGarragh was my supervisor for the duration of my placement at Club. He gave helpful feedback and was a good supervisor, especially during our one-on-one meetings. However, he is quite busy as the ‘Skills Development Coordinator’. One of his praises of me was my ability to jump in and just begin interacting with the club clients when I arrived. **I highly recommend this type of energy for this placement**. Justin will try to give you a breakdown of the work but as stated, he is kind of running the show on the main floor day to day and often preoccupied, whether that be with clients or as Skills Development Coordinator. He’s well loved as all the staff are, so clients often want his attention. This is why it would be beneficial to be able to have the confidence to simply jump in and start engaging with clients. If you have never worked with people with disabilities, I encourage you to leave any discomfort that society has equipped you with about disability at the door. People have many varied needs and ways of being, but people are just people. I made many connections with clients that I will treasure moving forwards and I encourage all who consider this placement to do the same. Let the clients tell you about themselves, and I do not only mean just the clients who can do so verbally. **I think this placement is great for anyone who is looking to go into advocacy, medical school or other roles in medicine and treatment** such as physiotherapists, occupational therapists or even counselors. Including any other medical practitioner adjacent roles. **It teaches and allows practice of important people skills, advocacy, problem solving, critical thinking and meeting people where they are.** As Jackie stated when I asked what language should be used when speaking to clients, disability or ability, she said “Members will tell you what they enjoy; some people use disabled, some use varied abilities.”

Club Inclusion has both a mission statement and a vision statement on their website. Their mission statement says “Club Inclusion provides social, cultural and recreational programs accessible to all people with disabilities. We enrich lives by building friendships, community, and success.” Their vision statement says, “Empowering people with disabilities and their families to thrive through innovative and creative programming, and by building bridges to inclusive communities.”

 Club activities change day to day sometimes, so it is important to be adaptable to different situations. **The strength of this placement is the experience with the clients.** I got to practice a lot of the occupational and vocational services that I will likely be doing with clients in the future.I had clients who bonded with me right away, one or two clients who I thought disliked me (they did not, but communicated in a way I was not used to, as I quickly found out) and clients who needed time to get used to me, this perky stranger who kept trying to talk to them.

 When I first interviewed for this placement, I spoke with Jackie Rivers, who is the General Manager. Professor Denike had informed me I would likely be working with her as the previous student had. Jackie and I had a phone call where Jackie spoke with me extensively about all the programs they put on at the club and what currently was offered. I wanted to try a couple of them out to get the most out of the experience and asked if that was possible. We discussed a plan that after being in the placement for a month to settle in, we could check in and I could readjust to explore different programming. I went into the placement thinking that she would be my supervisor. Instead, my supervisor was her husband, Justin McGarragh who is the Skills Development Coordinator at Club. This led to a bit of confusion at the beginning of my placement. Because I had been emailing with Jackie previously, and when Justin was introduced, I was unsure if I was supposed to still be emailing Jackie or both Jackie and Justin. Eventually I understood Justin was my point person and followed up with him exclusively.

 Jackie and I had spoken about the plethora of programs that the Club puts on weekly and also the ones that are put on less frequently. There were so many, I found the list overwhelming to look at but exciting. I was happy there would be lots of opportunities to work and contribute in different ways to get the most out of the placement experience. Club puts on either ‘Drop-in’ or ‘Day Program’ throughout most days of the week. Jackie did tell me there were more complex challenges in the Day program that have been turned away in other programs in the city. I spent my placement time during both Drop In and Day Program. I did check-in twice over email and in person during my placement about swapping days to attempt to engage with different programming (due to curiosity, not dislike) but Justin said he wouldn’t be there during most other programming and there was hesitation when I brought it up. For a future student, I suggest maybe starting with a more diverse schedule to avoid this instead of the approach that was suggested to me. I do not think I really missed out on a whole lot but if you are looking to try all the programming then just go for it. Justin told me what a help I was and I got to try out some diverse programming even if it was not all the programming I wanted to try. Club does offer other specific programming: exercise activities, science activities, programming around cooking, entrepreneurship programming, theatre/drama programming, an inclusive choir, shutterbugs (camera club), music therapy, holiday activities and more. Some of these can take place during Drop-in or Day Program and therefore I got to participate in some of them, aid in facilitation and sometimes facilitate them myself. This was the main crux of my work at Club Inclusion.

As stated previously, I spent my placement on Wednesday’s aiding in running the Drop-in program and Friday’s aiding with Day Program. I was expected to be there from 2:45-6 pm on Wednesdays and 8:45 am-1 pm on Friday’s. I ended up taking on multiple different projects and creating programs throughout my placement. When I first began it, Justin introduced me to a document that outlined goals that he had come up with for the placement. It included the first month and then left space for me to develop my own goals as I moved through the work. It started with goals like engaging with five new clients each day, moving to initiating low organizational activities with clients, engaging with more complex members, assisting with program delivery and setup, all the way to creating, submitting, setting up and facilitating my own programming. I had no problem with these as every client was new to me, and enjoyed getting to talk to members. Again, this is where I think it will be helpful if someone has the ability to just jump in and adapt to different situations.  My very first day, within minutes, I approached a client and asked them to teach me how to play a game. **Being able to take initiative around connecting with clients is important because that is what this work is about fundamentally, connecting with clients.** How are you supposed to facilitate and create programming for people you do not know? I also participated in the theater program where Justin volunteered me for a game where I was supposed to pretend to be an alien. I had to make up a language on the spot. I was very nervous but gave it my best shot at sounding silly blowing through my lips in different tones and got lots of the clients to laugh. The first day was really successful in terms of connecting with clients who were meeting a complete stranger. Throughout the placement I got to test my critical thinking, reaction and management of surprises with different clients. This included things like redirection, grounding exercises, determining how to aid clients in activities or processing things in ways that were accessible to them, and helping bring clients out of cognitive shut down, while making sure not to contribute to overwhelm, sensory or otherwise.

 The Drop In program is life-based and skill programming but also very much a casual space for the clients themselves. Day program is more regimented than Wednesdays are and often have more programming planned throughout. As previously mentioned, different programs can take place during Drop In as well as Day program. During my placement I got to participate in music therapy, the theater and drama program,  science programming, cooking programming, programming around money management, drumming programming, dance programming, art programming, programming around entrepreneurship and assisting with running a small business, set up for dances and community events as well as educational outings. These were the main day to day events during my work at Club Inclusion. I also got to familiarize myself with some of the tools that the organization uses to make the programming and space accessible for people. In example, the PECS board and accessibility devices and rooms centering sensory experience.

Regarding the other work I did, I ended up creating and conducting a couple programs myself. Firstly, I did an accessible, physical game. This required brainstorming on my end on what I wanted the game to look like as well as making sure that I could reduce or eliminate any barriers that may come up for the clients. Club Inclusion has lots of different clients who have varied abilities both physical and cognitive. During this activity I had to account for things like dexterity or hand mobility while also keeping in mind that I want every client to be able to engage and have fun. I came up with anything but your palms challenge, which is a physical game where you must balance as many balls as you'd like on a part of your body that isn't your palms. We eventually turned it into a race, where the clients and staff had to see if they could beat each other while balancing these balls across the gym. Specifying anything about your palms allowed folks who may have only had hand mobility to be able to use their hands to hold the ball, perhaps between their fingers or on top of their hand. As well, those using mobility devices, like a wheelchair, could use their laps if holding the ball between fingers was not comfortable or possible. As long as the players were not touching it with the middle of their palm. It was made adaptable so that if clients found it too easy, they could add multiple balls to balance. It also allowed clients with more mobility to get creative by putting it between their legs or under their armpits. Some clients even came up with the idea of putting it in their shirt which was incredibly smart. I had not anticipated that, it only added to the fun. I sought constructive feedback afterwards as was Justin's advice and the clients all agreed they had a good time and had no criticism. The skills this program taught and used were balance skills, critical thinking skills, compensatory motor control, proprioceptive and vestibular engagement, as well as anticipating outcomes.

The second program I did was a science program.  I decided to put on the experiment “elephant toothpaste” to encourage interest as well as portray stem as something that was accessible to clients. I spent the beginning of this asking clients if they knew what a hypothesis was, before breaking it down into a less academic language, comparing it to an educated guess.  We then talked about variables before moving on to the experiment instructions where I took guesses from clients on what our hypothesis was for what was going to happen when we mixed our variables together. I encouraged the re-examination of our hypothesis throughout as we introduced variables to each other and changed them to see how that would affect our outcome. Justin did give me some feedback about how some people just want to see the cool explosion and that I paced it well. Clients also gave me feedback that they really enjoyed this, some clients got to engage and work with their hands which they enjoyed while we talked about how to safely engage with chemicals when we're using our hands, and what safety equipment we can put in place to ensure it is safe to do so.  As well as some clients who were really engaged and excited to work with their own hypothesis, and experience the combustion, a result of their direct action. This program encouraged the growth of critical thinking skills, anticipating outcomes, creating a hypothesis and safety management when interacting with chemicals. The third program was a longer physically demanding game where I used the club parachute and conducted different games and ways to use it in one of the slots of Friday’s Day program.

Justin said I had good instincts and engaged with everyone, including less vocal and non-verbal clients and those with higher support needs. This placement is a great way to be able to expand your skill set around disability. Overall, I think this placement would be great for anyone who is looking to improve their creative thinking skills and gain experience considering barriers and accommodations they may never have experienced themselves. It will make you more capable and creative in your work if you really get to know the members of Club inclusion.