

*Friendships in Dyadic Relationships between a Young Adult with a Developmental Disability and a Nondisabled Peer: Dialogues on Friendship--Strengthening Connections*

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0211

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2013

Official Conference Proceedings 2013

Abstract

This study focused on the nature of friendship in each of two dyadic relationships between a young adult with a developmental disability and a nondisabled peer. Students with developmental disabilities who are included in university and college classes will meet nondisabled peers as inclusive education becomes more prevalent at the postsecondary level. The basic interpretive interviews captured on video helped to explore the nature of their friendships. Included were third-party informants, a parent and a professor, who illuminated the important themes that emerged during the research. This paper explores what can be done to strengthen connections among student populations.

Friendship. What does this mean for persons who have developmental disabilities, and nondisabled peers? Defined, to connect is to bring together, or into contact. Conversely, disconnected within this context, is marginalized, isolated, alone. Furthermore, young people who have developmental disabilities are more likely to experience isolation than others. What can we as educators do? How can we strengthen connections so that healthy and happy relationships flourish?

Without the required support to ensure that young people are not isolated within their school and communities, it may be that young people who have developmental disabilities, will not meet others, will not go out on the weekend, and will not share a rich, social experience that many of their nondisabled peers have. However, some work has been accomplished in Canada, and other countries around the world in building friendships through inclusive learning communities.

The regular school experience offers persons with developmental disabilities the opportunity to meet others who are not disabled and to form friendships with them. Friendships are important for the well-being of individuals

who have a disability and, if others embrace them, may also offer security at a later time in their community. This security may take many forms, for example,

employment opportunities, formal and informal recreational activities, and adult

friendships. Furthermore, when good friends surround a person, he or she lives a

fuller and richer life. Sutherland (2010).

According to Alberta Learning, Canada: "In the fall of 2010, Inclusion was identified as part of the government's Inspiring Action on Education initiative, and Setting the Direction was renamed Action on Inclusion to signal implementation of an inclusive education system" (Alberta Learning, n.d.). As we endeavor to develop an inclusive education system, we must also provide a foundation for friendships to occur and flourish. With the proper supports and strategies for students, bonds among persons with developmental disabilities, and nondisabled peers can be strengthened. Friends are crucial allies in a time when bullies seem to be common, and friendships are challenged for any young person. The friends that students make in life are important connections as they may offer the person with a developmental disability protection. Perhaps most importantly, however, friendship empowers all of us, and gives us a sense of belonging. We gain strength and courage, happiness, and joy from being with our friends.

It is difficult to find a definition that encompasses all of what friendship can be, but perhaps it can be described as a "social relationship between two people that is reciprocal, rewarding, and fun for both parties" (see Barber & Hupp. 1993). "Friendship is characterized by multiple voluntary contacts and shared experiences across weeks, months, or years" (Hendrickson, Shokoohi-Yekta, Hamre-Nietupski & Gable, 1996, p.4). Furthermore, proximity in all relationships is key to their development. Without the opportunity to interact, there is little hope that friendships will develop.

Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, and Rosenberg (2002) noted:

one of the key characteristics of building connections and friendships is being in close proximity to people and having frequent opportunities to interact with each other (Asher, Oden & Gottman, 1977; Hartup, 1975; Howes, 1983; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975) . . . . Research has demonstrated that in order for children and adults to form the necessary bonds for friendships they must have frequent access to one another. This access is facilitated when students are in close proximity to one another on a regular basis. So, it follows that students who attend the same schools as others who live in their neighborhood are more likely to form bonds that are strong enough to result in friendship. (Grenot-Scheyer, Coots & Falvey 1989). (p. 29).

Proximity, along with necessary supports in a school community, can help people from diverse groups to meet one another. It provides an opportunity to see who is on the journey with them, and sort out difficulties together. To exclude individuals with developmental, and various other disabilities from that journey leaves a number of people out of the discussion of what our world is and should be. It is then an unrealistic discussion, one that is not inclusive. For many years students with various disabilities have been included in regular classrooms, have successfully graduated, and have developed many friends along the way.

Studies that report difficulties in friendships between the two groups or the inability to form friendships, have cited various reasons that the relationship cannot develop “mainstream peers were often reported as kind but that an ‘equal’ friendship appeared difficult to develop because interests and abilities did not match” (Cuckle & Wilson, 2002, p.68). Also, as “the young people became older they found it difficult to sustain mainstream friendships; their mainstream peers wanted more independence that was usually not allowed to the more vulnerable, apparently less mature young people” (p.68).

Educators too, may also inadvertently deter friendship development in these dyads perhaps without meaning to, or devalue the person with their own limited beliefs of what a friendship is, and who can comprise them. Notably, many schools from primary to postsecondary may call themselves inclusive, however, if they do not offer ways for individuals with disabilities to meet other people without disabilities, and form friendships with them then they are missing a key component of the opportunity that inclusive education presents. Strengthening connections is an important aspect of this process. Educators need to ask: What can I do to help students achieve positive and lasting relationships? These strategies may include several tools that have been developed “to facilitate such connections and eventual friendships,” such as “Circle of Friends, Making Action Plans (MAPS), and planning Alternative Tomorrows with HOPE (PATH)” (Falvey et al., 2002, p.30).

Beyond the above mentioned tools, peers will always find ways to connect with the person with a developmental disability, on an individual basis, and collectively through social networks. Their ideas are important, and should not be overlooked. They will usually see a way to connect with their friend, and will bring in other peers in a very natural and organic way to form an even larger network. This may require

facilitators and educators to get out of the way to allow the friendship to occur, and guide the friends from time to time if necessary. (Sutherland, 2003). Peers will find refreshing ways to connect with each other as they are an essential part of inclusive education practices.

As researchers, it is also important to explore examples of dyadic relationships comprised of students with a developmental disability and peers without disabilities to overcome the belief that these students do not belong together or cannot form meaningful relationships with one another. It is not true that people who have difficulties such as intellectual impairments and physical challenges can have relationships only with others who have similar needs. This is a limited notion of friendships. Lutfiyya (1991) found an exchange and equality between people who were happy to be in relationships. She reported that

it was once held that the people most likely to be friends with individuals with learning difficulties are others with the same impairments. Whether this is consciously stated or not, many researchers believe it to be true, and then examine only this type of relationship (p. 234).

In classrooms, educators must play their part as they assist in the development of friendships, through collaborative learning strategies, peer supports and positive climates of belonging within classrooms. In secondary and postsecondary, the need to work in tandem with students who are learning how to collaborate with a diverse student population is of the utmost concern. Additionally, as educators we must model for students our respect for individual differences, and on an individual basis in our classrooms. Unfortunately, these practices may not occur as they should.

Society today places precedence on efficiency, and a “survival-of –the-fittest” mentality results in the widening of a multitude of disparities. Indeed, it may be impossible for schools to completely avoid the influence of such societal trends. However, in an educational setting that brims with the compassionate spirit of caring educators, there is a human warmth and passion that triumph over these tendencies and vibrantly nurture and support those students who feel detached and isolated. This is the power of trust. (SGI Newsletter, pg. 28, 2013).

Facilitators too, can be utilized to strengthen connections, and can encourage students to get together in ways that are natural to the friendship. (Sutherland, 2010). Facilitation may need to occur when friendships do not develop. Here educators can use various ways to strengthen possible opportunities for friendship within the classroom, where students may naturally be drawn to one another. There is no one way that friendships will grow, but we need to seize the opportunities as they arise, and strengthen them.

The central exploration of this study was to examine friendships between individuals with and without disabilities by the use of a basic interpretive video interview. According to Merriam (2002), “The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what a researcher has learned about a phenomena” (p.5). Through an audiovisual medium, I hoped to be able to understand more about the friendships, as video footage may

convey relevant information through observing interactions within the dynamic of the friendships, and through basic interview questions such as: What is Friendship? How does it feel? What do you together?-- to mention a few.

As Eisner (1997) proposed, "Put another way, our capacity to wonder is stimulated by the possibilities the new forms of representation suggest" (p. 8). Communication may have been a concern for the people who were being interviewed, as the person may not easily articulate his or her views. To find alternative communication means was a way to understand more that may not be revealed through a basic interpretive interview. It is through seeing people develop and interact, what people do, and how people are together that is telling about the relationship. Through observation we may come to understand more. The study of gestures and nonverbal cues, tone of voice, body language is an important aspect of this study. There is ongoing, shared communication, not necessarily verbalized, between the friends. The video information adds to the data. Visuals are a powerful medium, where we can see and glean for ourselves some of the essential aspects of the relationship. This window may reveal what is important within the relationship.

What is particular to this dialogue of strengthening connections is the aspect of what the benefits of the friendships are, and some of what can be achieved through young people being together, and friendships between persons with developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers. Some of the comments of the participants of the study Shani and Aimee, Alethea and Emily, and the pilot podcast of Alex and Jollean, were such that joy and laughter is evident in all friendships. Alethea commented: "She's hilarious, we have so much fun." Aimee said, that what makes their friendship special is "a smile." A friend also makes Aimee feel "glad." When asked to define "Who is a Friend?" Emily replied: "Someone who you can trust and fun to be around with." Shani noted "that friends help us to become more than we are right now." Jollean said "it has helped her to become a "better person," that she has "more confidence" in herself, and that he's made a difference in her life, and she's made a difference in his life. Alex said about their friendship,-- "it is very important." "I am so happy about with Jo."

The additional benefits of any friendship are immeasurable and cannot be underestimated in their transformative power. What is important to note is that with supports and encouragement that people who like one another will not be discouraged, and will find a way to make their relationship to flourish. Taylor and Bogdan (1989) in their qualitative research found when they asked their participants to talk about their relationship with someone who has a developmental disability, they were taken aback because they did not view the relationship as something extraordinary that they would describe. Furthermore, they also said that there is systemic and ongoing prejudice that persons with developmental disabilities face daily, and yet the friendships that they were involved in endured. Lutfiyaa (1991) also says that the relationships that she described are "mutual, exclusive and voluntary nature." She also found an "exchange and equality between people who were happy to be in relationships."

Strengthening connections is about bringing people together, and one person being there for another. When we are there for someone else we strengthen our own inner selves, and our humanity. In conclusion, without people with developmental disabilities as friends we have lost genuine friends. There are many people who are in

friendships, and as Frank said, “Alex and Jollean are friends, and I think that says it all” (Sutherland, 2003).

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