"That's How We Do It": Friendship Work Between High School Students With and Without Autism or Developmental Disability

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This is an interpretivist qualitative study that explores the contexts and dynamics of friendships among three groups of young adults; each group included an individual with autism or severe disability and high school students without disabilities. Data were collected through ethnographic methods where friends interacted together. Particular attention was paid to how friendships were enacted when one individual does not speak, struggles with initiation or movement, experiences anxiety, and/or uses a wheelchair. Students without disabilities tended to provide more of the help in these relationships to sustain their connection as friends and maintain opportunities to interact. The findings include examples and discussions of how the students with and without disabilities enacted their meaningful relationships.

DESCRIPTORS: friendship, severe disability, autism, reciprocity

This paper focuses on friendships between high school students with and without severe disabilities. My working definition for such friendships stresses that they are reciprocal and meaningful relationships that are chosen individually, occur outside of friendship programs, and are based on shared interest (Amado, 2004; Berndt, 1982; Bogdan & Taylor, 1989; Chappell, 1994; Day & Harry, 1999; Lutfiyya, 1991; Perske, 1988; Pogrebin, 1987; Rubin, 1985; Siperstein, Leffert, & Wenz-Gross, 1997; Snell & Janney, 2000; Staub, 1998; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989). These relationships are not "helping the handicapped" (Murray-Seegert, 1989) and are not based on benevolence or one-way helping (Kunc, 1992; Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002) but share in the value of human reciprocity (Kleewer, 1998). There is a qualitative difference between such friendships and the relationships that develop in formal friendship programs or other adult-initiated, school-structured initiatives. Relationships in these programs tend to be hierarchical in a helper-helpee dynamic, include payment of some kind, and often end when the program ends (Schaffner & Buswell, 1992; Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci, & Peck, 1994; Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002). Van der Klift and Kunc highlight this difference,

As classrooms become increasingly diverse, new strategies are being developed to ensure that the new students are more than simply present. Friendship circles, school clubs, and special buddy systems have been implemented as formalized attempts to foster inclusion and develop relationships. While increased interaction may result from such efforts, friendship often remains elusive. Children may have successful buddy systems during school hours and still be isolated and friendless after three o'clock. (page 1)

By quite literally taking their place, programmatic interactions can prevent the development of friendships.

Meyer et al. (1998) engaged in participatory research, using both quantitative and qualitative methods in five secondary schools to examine the types of relationships between students with and without disabilities. They identified six types of relationships: (a) Ghosts and Guests, (b) The Inclusion Kid/Different Friend, (c) I’ll Help, (d) Just Another Kid/Student, (e) Regular Friends, and (f) Best Friends/Friends Forever. Most social interaction observed fell into the "I’ll help" category with students behaving “like a teacher” (p. 201), although beneficial academically, these are different from Categories 4–6 regarding reciprocity and the potential for friendship.

In one example of relationships that were not quite friendships, Kishi and Meyer (1994) explored the perceptions held by 183 teenagers without disabilities of the relationships they had with classmates with disabilities in inclusive classes 6 years earlier. A significant percentage of the students described their interactions as helping rather than reciprocal relationships. Kishi and Meyer stated that their teachers modeled care-giving roles and that the students with disabilities were stigmatized by falling under the umbrella of the "special" program. The relationships ceased completely in high school because
most of the students with disabilities attended special schools and classes segregated from their peers. When students without disabilities participate in friendship programs, they may see themselves as peer teachers or helpers rather than friends. Students in Helmstetter, Peck, and Giangreco's (1994) statewide sample of high school students from 45 high schools reported that they acted as a tutor in 43% of the total interactions with classmates with disabilities and as a helper in 25% of the interactions. Interactions based on a natural relationship such as friendship were only 11% of the total. More than half (58%) of the students without disabilities received school credit for interacting with peers with disabilities. On the other hand, students without disabilities in classes with students with disabilities reported more positive outcomes (e.g., acceptance and desire to interact in the future) than did students receiving credit to interact with their peers with disabilities.

Recent research focused on peer supports has found that peer interactions of students with severe disabilities increased when they were supported by a classmate rather than by a paraeducator or special educator (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, 2007). Kluth (2003) emphasizes that effective peer supports are delivered in a "reciprocal partnership instead of in a helper–helpee relationship" (page 100). Accordingly, she suggests that teachers seek opportunities for all students to both give and receive help. Similarly, Jorgensen, Schuh, and Nisbet (2006) stress that the respectful use of natural supports in inclusive classes should also allow students with disabilities to help students without disabilities. They add that natural supports should "ensure that students with disabilities have opportunities for relating to other students outside of formal peer–support relationships" (p. 130), emphasizing that, although it may begin there, friendship takes place outside of formal contexts.

Much of the literature suggests that friendships and social interactions between students with and without intellectual and developmental disabilities are more prevalent during the elementary years than in secondary school settings (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Carter, Hughes, Guth, & Copeland, 2005; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; McVilly, Stanciliffe, Parmenter, & Burton-Smith, 2006a, 2006b; Strully & Strully, 1985; Staub, 1998). When social interactions and relationships do occur in high schools, it seems that they often risk falling under the category of help and taking place in these formal contexts.

In conducting this research, I strove to explore how friendship was enacted in high school settings when one individual experienced autism and/or severe disability. I was interested in the development of friendship as opposed to the one-sided helper–helpee relationship, as well as what these friendships looked like on a daily basis. I asked two primary questions that guided the research:

1. What are the contexts of friendships between young adults with and without autism or severe disabil-

ity? In other words, how and where did they become friends?

2. What are the dynamics of friendships between young adults with and without autism or severe disability? In other words, what do these friendships look like, especially when one friend does not speak, struggles with initiation or movement, experiences anxiety, and/or uses a wheelchair?

**Methods**

This is an interpretivist qualitative study that explored the contexts and dynamics of friendships among three groups of young adults; each group includes an individual with autism or with severe disability and high school students without disabilities. In this study, I hoped to learn from the participants themselves. Recognizing the multiple, socially constructed meanings of "friendship" and "severe disability," I adhered to Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor's (1992) description of the goal of interpretivist research to "describe, interpret, and understand" (p. 6).

This research was optimistic (Biklen, 2005; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) in that it explored successful friendships between individuals with autism or severe disability and high school students without disabilities. Rather than focusing solely on the barriers to friendship or on formal friendship programs, I wanted to identify and learn from examples of existing friendships in natural settings between young adults who are often assumed to be too qualitatively different to form social relationships together. I believe these friendships are possible and should be more prevalent. Thus, in this study, I did not ask the doubting question, "Are these friendships possible?" Rather, I asked the more optimistic question, "What are the contexts and dynamics of successful friendships?"

**Participants**

In this study I engaged in purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2002). Because payment or obligation of any kind undermines the choice to become friends (Strully & Strully, 1989), I searched for students with and without disabilities who became friends naturally outside of formal friendship groups. I focused on high school students and young adults because of the lack of relationships between students of this age. I sent a one-page description of my study via email to families and colleagues whom I know, as well as to disability listservs. The description asked recipients to forward it on to others who might be interested to reflect a snowball sampling approach. All recipients were given the option to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study.

The primary participants are three groups of young adults and/or high school students who have become friends with each other (see Table 1 for a summary of students’ descriptive information).
Table 1
Summary of Students' Descriptive Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Setting, grade</th>
<th>Disability label/status</th>
<th>Mode of communication</th>
<th>No. of years as friends</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shaffer</td>
<td>Central High School general education with special education services; 12th grade</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Types; reads what he has typed, and speaks some words as he types and spontaneously</td>
<td>1 year (classmates since 1st grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Megan</td>
<td>Central High School general education; 12th grade</td>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td>Speaks</td>
<td>1 year (classmates since 1st grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariah</td>
<td>Central High School general education; 12th grade</td>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td>Speaks</td>
<td>1 year (Classmates since 1st grade)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Dance troupe; Early 20s</td>
<td>Autism</td>
<td>Speaks; tends not to initiate with others</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jocelyn</td>
<td>Dance troupe; 12th grade</td>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td>Speaks</td>
<td>6 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joshua</td>
<td>East High School special education; 10th grade</td>
<td>Menkes syndrome; wheelchair user</td>
<td>Facial expressions, physical interactions; does not speak</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie</td>
<td>East High School general education; 10th grade</td>
<td>Nondisabled</td>
<td>Speaks</td>
<td>5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah (all names are pseudonyms) were seniors at Central High School, a small, suburban public school in the northeast. Shaffer and Megan, classmates since first grade, developed a friendship during the early months of their senior year. Shaffer and Mariah, similarly classmates since first grade, developed a budding friendship. Theirs is a story of longtime classmates who were acquaintances for years and developed friendship as they neared the end of their high school careers.

Shaffer is, in his words, “a young man with autism.” He loves visiting libraries to discover new fact-based books and educational videos. He is an honor roll student and attends general education classes along with therapies and sensory breaks. Shaffer types to communicate and reads what he has typed. He also speaks words as he types them and says some words spontaneously both before he types them and when he is not typing. He has developed the ability to type without the physical support he once received, though he still receives some physical support underneath the forearm or elbow from less experienced communication facilitators. Megan and Mariah are both outgoing young women who play lacrosse and identify as nondisabled. They are both active members of the senior class and are looking forward to college.

Shaffer interacts closely with three educators at Central. Mrs. Cruz is Shaffer’s paraeducator and communication facilitator in math, whereas Mrs. Nelson fills the same roles in all other classes. Mrs. Smith, a special education teacher, is Shaffer’s case manager. All three women are experienced educators and outgoing, friendly individuals.

Emily and Jocelyn met when they began dancing together as partners in the Rainbow Troupe during its inaugural year of 1998. The Rainbow Troupe is an after school dance troupe consisting of 10 young women with and without disabilities of general high school age. Frustrated with the prevalence of separate activities for this population, Mrs. Jones set out to combine two youth groups she led (one for young women with disabilities and one for young women without disabilities) in a participatory and inclusive after-school activity. She said specifically that she did not want to create a friendship group, but a dance group. She hoped her future dancers would be friendly, but she was initially interested in the inclusion aspect, as well as the health benefits of a physical activity. Mrs. Jones is an adult woman who is active in her community through her work in disability services and volunteer work at her local church. She enlisted Mrs. Paul, an adult coworker and friend, to be choreographer.

Jocelyn is a thoughtful, quiet young woman without a disability and is a senior in a rural public high school in the northeast. Emily is a young woman in her early 20s who enjoys riding horses and, in her mother’s words, “has autism.” Both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Paul explained to me that Jocelyn and Emily were drawn to one another as dancers and friends. Emily walks and talks, but she tends not to initiate conversation or interaction with others (except for Jocelyn). She recently finished high school and did not work or attend college courses.

Stephanie and Joshua were sophomores at East High School, a suburban public high school in the northeast with an approximate population of 1100 students. Stephanie is an outgoing young woman with an easygoing nature who does not have a disability. Joshua is an outgoing young man with a playful nature who has Menkes syndrome. He is very expressive with his facial features and watches everything going on around him, consistently looking to interact with people who are close by. He uses a wheelchair, does not speak words, and needs support with most daily tasks, as his one consistent movement is to reach out with his left hand. They have been friends since they met as reading partners in an inclusive upper elementary class. From then, Stephanie followed the general education curriculum in classes with her peers, whereas Joshua received special education services in a separate self-contained class.
Data Collection

I entered the field where high school students with and without severe disabilities interacted with each other and had developed their friendships. I collected descriptive, qualitative data through ethnographic methods. Specifically, I conducted observations of the participants in their high schools and after-school activities and conducted semistructured interviews with the students and educators as my primary data collecting techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). The observations allowed me to focus on the daily enactments of friendship, whereas the interviews focused on the social history of each friendship group or dyad so I could contextualize how the students came to be friends.

I set out to complete at least five observations with each group of participants during a 6-month period of one school year. I conducted 20 observations of 2–3 hr each at Central High School with Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah. I attended each of Shaffer’s classes at least three times and set up each visit to observe lunch and the classes before and/or after lunch. I conducted 19 observations of 2 hr each with the Rainbow Troupe. Most of these (15) were during weekly Monday rehearsals, and the remaining four were during performances including their annual Spring Concert.

I experienced difficulty scheduling more than five observations with Stephanie and Joshua since they joined the study after it had started, and they live out of state, 6 hr away. I managed to conduct five observations with Joshua and Stephanie, each one lasting 2–3 hr. Of the five observations, three were outside of school and two were at East High School during lunch and free periods. Clearly, I spent significantly less time with Stephanie and Joshua than with the other participants. However, I included them because of their uniquely strong connection as friends. I observed them in multiple settings, learned about their social history, and discovered how and when they typically interact.

I captured all observations with descriptive and reflective field notes that included details of the activities, conversations, and interactions observed, as well as observer comments to reflect my interpretations of the observations. I also conducted several semistructured interviews with participants in each setting. Questions asked were as follows:

- Tell me about your friendship with [name].
- How did you meet and/or become friends with [name]?
- What kinds of activities do you do with [name]?
- What is easy/difficult about being friends with [name]?
- What do you contribute to the friendship?

All interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. The transcriptions, including observer comments, were used as data. I collected 143 total pages of interview transcripts (Rainbow Troupe, 97 pages; Central, 36 pages; East, 10 pages), and I compiled over 665 pages of field notes from the 44 total observations in my three settings (Central High School, 280 pages; Rainbow Troupe, 320 pages; East High School, 65 pages), yielding 808 total pages of data.

Data Analysis

As advocated by scholars in qualitative and teacher research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Hubbard & Power, 1999), inductive data analysis began as data were collected and occurred more intensively after all data were collected. This maintained the focus on learning from the participants as opposed to testing a pre-existing hypothesis. Analysis of each participant observation field note and interview transcript contributed to developing and further honing the framework with which I entered the field subsequently. On a weekly basis, fellow researchers, acting as both external auditors (no knowledge of study) and peer debriefers (knowledge of study), raised questions and gave me feedback about how I was interpreting my data. In this sense, the inductive analysis was ongoing, thorough, and dynamic and followed the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Using categorical coding, I developed over 100 codes describing data by keywords or phrases (e.g., Barrier to friendship, Missed opportunity, Separate places, School strategy, Strong connections, Friendship work). Codes were refined multiple times with input from external auditors and peer debriefers. I reread the field notes and interview transcripts carefully and proceeded to develop primary and secondary codes (e.g., Barrier to friendship, Separate places). I collapsed the codes into 20 categories, compared the experiences of participants in the three settings, and identified emerging themes. Of these, seven categories focused on educator strategies, six on barriers to or missed opportunities for social interactions, five on definitions and enactments of friendship, and two on school environment. This manuscript presents several key themes related to the contexts and dynamics of the friendships.

Methodological triangulation was employed to verify the qualitative analysis. Data were collected over an extended time (over 6 months). I used interviews to clarify events or statements that I had observed and alternately looked for things in observations that were described during interviews. I also shared written data with participants to engage in member checking. Additionally, I strove for investigator triangulation by engaging in constant dialogue with fellow researchers and colleagues.

Findings

The findings are organized into three key components of how these friendships were enacted. The first section describes the connections of friendship, emphasizing reciprocity in that each friend contributed to and enjoyed the relationship. The second section details various difficulties each group faced in maintaining
opportunities to interact as friends, or in other words, potential barriers to their friendships. The third and final section offers examples of friendship work, representing efforts to negotiate the difficulties and overcome potential barriers.

**The Connections of Friendship**

There was no doubt about the strength of the bonds shared by the participants in the study. The connections of their friendships were readily apparent, clearly reflecting reciprocal feelings and natural interactions enjoyed—and chosen—by each participant. Below are examples of their connections of and mutual contributions to their friendships.

During lunch one day, Shaffer was typing with Megan's support at a table with several classmates. They were laughing together at what Shaffer had communicated. When Shaffer left for class, I asked Megan what they were talking/typing about:

> Well, we've been to the zoo a few times, right? We were looking at the swans and then I saw a pink swan, and I never saw one, so I got all excited and said, "Shaffer, check out the pink swan!" And he kind of smiled and then typed, "That's not a pink swan. It's a flamingo." And I was like, "Oops." So, now, every so often he asks me about the "pink swan" and laughs, kind of ragging on me.

This inside joke emerged from time spent together. Shaffer initially—and humorously—pointed out Megan's mistake and then teased her about it in front of their peer group, not by speaking but by typing his words. The ease with which he did this, showcasing both his ability to type fluently and timely, as well as his comfort level with Megan to tease her publicly, was key to their connection. Both Megan and Mariah stressed that Shaffer's intelligence and wit, as well as his communication method, were unique, interesting, and a big part of why they enjoyed their time together.

During the first Rainbow Troupe observation, I noticed a young woman who would turn out to be Emily standing to the side of the group, expressionless, and rocking side to side, watching the others talk excitedly before rehearsal started. Then a young woman who turned out to be Jocelyn entered the room and Emily immediately erupted into an enormous smile. Emily walked toward Jocelyn and exclaimed, "My buddy!" Jocelyn returned a similar smile, and they hugged.

Both Mrs. Jones and Mrs. Paul felt that Emily and Jocelyn were the heart and soul of Rainbow Troupe, not only because they were the most veteran members but also because of their connection. Emily literally could not contain her excitement whenever Jocelyn walked through the door to the rehearsal room. When Jocelyn was not present, Emily isolated herself, rocking back and forth, with a scowl or an expression of anxiety on her face.

Likewise, Jocelyn felt strongly about Emily and sought her out immediately upon entering the church basement. During rehearsals, they were simply always together.

One day, Stephanie knelt to the right of Joshua's wheelchair and he reached across his body with his left hand toward her head. He flashed a wry grin, looking as if he knew exactly what he was doing when he tugged at her hair. She said, "Hey! Josh!" She pulled her hair out of his hand and stood back up. He laughed, and she shook her head with a friendly and feigned look of exasperation. She smiled at him, and he straightened up with excitement in his wheelchair. They held hands for a moment before leaving.

Joshua displayed intentionality using one of the few movements he can control to playfully interact with Stephanie. He demonstrated a type of slapstick humor that represents a complex form of nonspoken communication and helped form their connection. Whenever either one of them entered a room, they immediately scanned it to find the other and share a smile. They consistently expressed enjoyment to be together.

**Potential Barriers to Friendships**

In addition to the connections they shared, there were key potential barriers to friendships related to the experiences of disability that affected the interactions in each group of friends. The ultimate success of these friendships is that these young people figured out how to overcome these barriers. For Shaffer, the key barrier related to his mode of communication as well as his difficulty with initiating conversations. Emily experienced significant social anxiety that often limited her participation in social interactions. Although Stephanie and Joshua had learned to communicate together, they often struggled to get together due to transportation difficulties.

**Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah: "I talk to you though my legs carry me away"**

When classmates greeted Shaffer in the hallways at Central, he did not respond to them in any noticeable way. The lack of a returned greeting looked like Shaffer did not want to say hello or was incapable of such a greeting. However, this assumption was false. Speaking of these hallway conversations, Shaffer stressed that the pace was too quick: "Only thinking having a communication of the kind that has to be so fast is usually so looking only to say hi." Shaffer's mother shared his assessment, which presents a drastically different social dynamic than what his classmates may have assumed:

> Oh, yeah, he says, "I talk to you in my brain even though my legs carry me away." I've always loved that. It's so descriptive. And it's true. The lag time, and by the time he hears it and then starts to try to formulate, people are long gone.
Even though it seemed that Shaffer does not greet his classmates, he wants to and actually does say hello to them. It is just that he greets them in his head immediately and cannot get the words out until they are farther down the hall. This difficulty also reflects a dynamic in which Shaffer does not usually have the time and space to stop and type comments in the crowded hallways between classes, which is his most reliable form of communication. The quick hallway greetings require spoken language delivered immediately, a type of performance on demand in which Shaffer could not yet engage.

Mrs. Nelson further explained this potential barrier:

One of the things that's always a conflict is that we are in high school and it is so structured and a lot of interaction between kids in high school is the very spontaneous, like sliding something in between, like a comment here and a comment there, in between when the teacher almost has her back turned or has to get a film started or that kind of thing, and I think it's really hard because it's such a little split second of time and then Shaffer, he just doesn't work in those little split seconds.

Shaffer’s reaction time exceeds such spontaneous interactions so without accommodating this, it becomes a barrier to social interactions and the development of friendships.

Shaffer consistently worked on his own and with Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Nelson, and Mrs. Cruz to become more interactive and to initiate conversations with his peers. Although he continued to work on this, Shaffer suggested a specific strategy related to his inability to partake in the quick and spontaneous hallway conversations: “Maybe walking with a friend who could talk as we walked would be great.” This is an example of a one-sided conversation in which the individual who can talk assumes his or her friend hears and understands everything that is being said and carries on a typical conversation although the other does not respond by speaking.

Jocelyn and Emily: “She’s looking down, she’s nervous”

Arrivals to the church for Rainbow Troupe rehearsal took on significant social importance because the group met only once per week. Dancers were excited to see each other, and they took a few minutes to catch up with one another. This held true for all of the dancers but Emily who stood sideways to the group of talking dancers, watching them, rocking front and back, and not talking to anyone. She occasionally smiled softly when one of the dancers made a joke, but most of the time her expression was a scowl, and she appeared to be anxious.

One rehearsal when the typically tardy Jocelyn arrived early, Emily became visibly excited and joined her in the group of dancers conversing before rehearsal. She stood by Jocelyn’s side, smiling, rocking side to side (as opposed to front and back). However, she did not speak. When Mrs. Jones asked her how she was doing, she did not respond. She rocked front and back again.

During the “Circle Time” before rehearsal when Mrs. Jones would ask the young women community-building questions, Emily reacted in the same manner. She looked down at the ground, rocked front and back, and typically provided the same response. Mrs. Paul explained her perception of this:

She always says, “I don’t know.” I’m going to start sitting next to her and when Mrs. Jones asks the question maybe rephrase it for her to let her think about it a little bit more because I don’t know if she’s really paying attention to what’s happening until it gets around to her. She might be so concerned with everybody looking at her and having to give an answer that she’s not making eye contact, she’s looking down, she’s nervous, so I’m wondering if we do that it might help to get her to open up more, and I think a lot of it has to do with the comfort level.

One of the most interesting parts of this study was that, after a few rehearsals, I began to notice that Emily spoke and became much more animated while dancing. One afternoon, the dancers formed their circle to start a dance in which they walked around the circle and then turned inward to come together in the middle. Emily hopped with each step and rocked side to side. She smiled and looked at the other young women in proximity in the circle. She then said excitedly to the group, “We’re going to move.” Jocelyn replied, “Yup, in a circle.” Emily asked, “Are we going to crash?” A few of the dancers, including Jocelyn, laughed. Jocelyn said, “I hope not.” During another rehearsal, while working on the same dance, Emily asked of the group, “We’re still doing this again, aren’t we?” Then, as the dancers started walking toward each other, she declared, “We’re going in.” The comments were not only humorous but noticeable, because the other dancers did not speak while dancing, and Emily did not speak before the rehearsal.

During another rehearsal, Mrs. Paul demonstrated a difficult step and then said encouragingly to the group, “Alright, let’s perfect it.” She turned away to start the music. The dancers gathered in their circle in the center of the room to start this dance. Emily asked the group, “Make it perfect (adjective) or perfect (transitive verb) it?” This fantastic play on words and pronunciations manifested a sense of humor, interactive style, and thinking capacity that was not as readily apparent before rehearsals and during Circle Time. Again, Mrs. Paul shared her perceptions:

I think because that’s her comfort zone. Everybody is doing what she is doing. There’s not a focus directly on her at that minute during dancing, so she’s more comfortable to talk at that point. She doesn’t have to give an answer or do anything other than what everyone else is doing.
**Stephanie and Joshua: “Who has the wheelchair accessible van?”**

The issue of inaccessible transportation limited the things Stephanie and Joshua could do together. Put simply, Stephanie could not pick up Joshua for an evening out by themselves because her car is not wheelchair accessible. To spend time together outside of school, Joshua needed accessible transportation, which required planning ahead of time, thus limiting the spontaneity of their shared time. Joshua's special education teacher, Ms. Lyon, explained the challenge further: “They all want to do something at night, and they’re 16 years old, you’re crowding into someone’s car, the last thing you’re thinking is, ‘Who has the wheelchair accessible van with the tie-down?’, besides the family.” Not being able to jump in your friend’s car to go to the store during a free period, to drive to the dance, or to go to the coffee shop after play rehearsal significantly impacts the amount and the quality of time spent together.

The other potential barrier they faced, similar to Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah and to a degree with Emily and Jocelyn, is that Joshua could not verbally initiate interactions or make plans with Stephanie. That the initiation of interactions presented a difficulty of social mechanics for Shaffer, Emily, and Joshua related to their experiences of disability required that their friends contribute additional friendship work to their relationships.

**Friendship Work**

Although all friendships are unique, these friendships were different in that there were specific limitations on the ways the participants interacted, what they did together, and how often and where they spent time together. The process of recognizing and negotiating these difficulties or potential barriers was central to the development and maintenance of the participants’ friendships. This process resulted in the students without disabilities engaging in friendship work. The friendship work required learning about experiences of disability and naturally providing necessary supports during interactions. Whereas the participants with disabilities addressed their difficulties with specific social mechanics and also contributed to the friendships in various ways, the students without disabilities enacted much of the friendship work, which included the following:

1. initiating time spent together,
2. providing real-time prompts during interactions,
3. waiting for responses from their friends, and
4. redirecting conversations to their friends.

**Initiating time spent together**

Although Stephanie often stressed that she was not special for being friends with Joshua, she did engage in friendship work with him that was crucial to the continued success of their relationship. Because Joshua was not able to control his surroundings with his own physical actions or by communicating to others what he wanted to do, this responsibility largely fell on Stephanie. She initiated all of their interactions and time spent together “chilling out” at school or in the community by deciding to spend time with Joshua, making plans, and arranging for accessible transportation. Without this initiation by Stephanie, they most likely would not have spent as much time together.

Similarly, Megan and Mariah initiated their social outings with Shaffer. They attended IMAX movies, spent time at the zoo and candy shop, and went out for burgers at their favorite local dive. Shaffer’s difficulty initiating greetings and other social interactions extended to suggesting these activities to do together. To further complicate matters, he did not speak on the phone. One morning toward the end of math class, Megan had been talking to Shaffer about the new IMAX film and said, “I’ll call your mom after practice.” A female classmate sitting behind Megan overheard and asked, “You’re calling his mom? Isn’t that, um, bad?” Megan took it in stride and replied, “No. That’s how we do it. He can’t talk on the phone, so I call his mom.” While Megan and Mariah initiated the planning of these activities, Shaffer gave his input to the planning process because they asked him about it and supported him to type his thoughts. They ensured that it was as reciprocal a planning process as possible, although they needed to make the calls.

**Providing real-time prompts**

When they were first paired up, Emily lashed out at Jocelyn with aggressive verbal and physical behaviors. Jocelyn did not take these personally, and she reacted with patience and humor to help defuse potentially volatile situations. She explained that she learned a lot about such behaviors from her mother who worked with adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

An extension of Jocelyn’s initial behavioral supports to Emily, Jocelyn provided word cues to Emily while they were dancing. Emily’s initial aggression resulted partly from being anxious about not knowing the steps, so the word cues helped Emily to remember the steps and acted as real-time prompts. They were enacted by Jocelyn quietly, subtly, and naturally woven into the steps she performed. One afternoon during rehearsal, the dancers formed a straight line to complete the dance steps to the lyrics, “With your hand on my shoulder.” They placed their hands on the shoulders of the dancers to their left one by one down the line. When it was Emily’s turn, Jocelyn turned back to her right and lifted Emily’s left arm with her right arm, popping it up on her shoulder. As she did that, Jocelyn said quietly to Emily, “Shoulder.”

In addition to being supportive during the dances, Jocelyn’s word cues became unique emblems of their friendship, evolving into their own inside jokes:

I [Jocelyn] try to be creative with it I guess, like “Reach for the butterfly,” and then she’ll reach. We
had one dance we had to go like that (she demonstrates her arms wiggling/waving repeatedly), and I said, “Wiggle your arms like worms.” So I bried her and I said, “If you wiggle your arms like worms, I’ll get you Gummi Worms!” She did it. And then with one dance it’s kind of like doing a backstroke, so I’m like, “Swim!” And she’ll do it. Or, like, “One hand up.” Or, using just one word, she’ll do it, but you say, “Take a step this way, go to the left, and put your hand up,” then she’ll be like, you know, (demonstrates a scowl on her face), because it’s too many words, and then she just gets frustrated and then angry.

Combined with their humor and hugs, the real-time prompts became a form of natural supports integral to their relationship.

Megan and Mariah were also fluent in these prompts. As an example, one day Shaffer and Megan walked down the same hall together. As they neared the stairwell Shaffer began to talk to himself and wiggle his fingers in front of his chest, flapping his hands a bit as he did so. Megan placed her right hand on Shaffer’s left shoulder. He looked at her, seeming to snap out of another thought pattern, and they continued walking down the stairs. Mrs. Nelson explained these situations:

I guess a number of people who are autistic have that thing where they just track flies and Shaffer, the way the school is set up you go up the stairs and there’s the windows and each time in the fall when there’s flies there, he just is drawn to them, and especially kids who are new, and I think last year one of the kids who was a freshman—and he didn’t really have any connection with Shaffer like the other kids do—and he made some remark.

Megan explained that she knew Shaffer did not mean to do that and she did not want the other students staring at him. Shaffer had asked for and appreciated this support for that reason. Megan learned to enact the physical prompt from watching Mrs. Nelson.

Waiting for responses

When one friend does not respond immediately and struggles with initiating conversations, it can be difficult to enact the social interactions that manifest friendship. While Shaffer continued to work on his social communication, his friends engaged in the friendship work of waiting for his responses. One afternoon at the end of science class, most of the students were walking towards the door. Mariah and the three female students she was sitting with walked out together. Mariah paused at the door, turned back to Shaffer, and said, “Bye, Shaffer.” She did not turn away immediately, but waited for his response. In fact, when a few students stopped behind her at the door, she stepped to the side to let them through. Because his communication device was in his bag, Mrs. Nelson prompted him, “Shaffer, say goodbye to Mariah.” Shaffer looked up at Mrs. Nelson who was pointing to the door and then looked over to Mariah and said quietly, “Bye, Mariah.” Mrs. Nelson prompted him again, “Shaffer, say it louder.” He said, “Bye, Mariah,” a little louder. Mariah, still waiting, waved and said, “See ya.”

Mariah took the friendship work of waiting one step further when she drew attention to Shaffer’s lack of a response in a humorous way that acted as a friendly prompt. One afternoon Shaffer finished his lunch after the bell rang and the next lunch period began. Mariah entered the cafeteria and greeted Shaffer. Shaffer then turned and began to walk away. Mariah yelled, “Hey, Shaffer! Aren’t you going to say goodbye?!” Shaffer stopped and smiled. He said quietly, “Bye, Mariah.”

Similarly, Jocelyn and Stephanie often displayed not only the patience to wait but the knowledge that there was indeed something to wait for when interacting and communicating with Emily and Joshua, respectively. Jocelyn waited for and also prompted Emily to give a response other than her automatic and/or deflecting “I don’t know.” Stephanie knew to wait for Joshua to move his arm into position to shake hands and also to look over at her when she said goodbye.

Redirecting conversations

The final type of friendship work enacted by the students without disabilities included redirecting conversations to their friends. When Shaffer and Mariah’s science class worked in the library’s computer laboratory on their research projects, Mariah sat next to Shaffer in the empty spot to his right. “Hi, Shaffer.” Shaffer responded quietly, “Hi, Mariah,” and continued to say something else that was too quiet to make out. Mariah asked, “What are you saying?” Shaffer said something else, but it was still too quiet. “Are you asking me which ones (choice of two pollutants for their research project) I’m doing?” Shaffer replied in a louder, conversational voice, “Which ones are you doing?” Mariah replied, “Asbestos and arsenic. What about you? Which ones are you doing?” Mrs. Nelson started to answer for him, “He’s doing…” Mariah maintained her gaze on Shaffer when Mrs. Nelson spoke, and then Mariah cut her off, saying to Shaffer, “Point on my paper.” She placed the handout in front of Shaffer and reached with her right hand across Shaffer’s body to support him underneath his left forearm. He pointed to one of the items, and she repeated it questioningly, “Cadmium?” Mrs. Nelson replied, “Yup.” Mariah then asked, “And, what is the other one?” She supported him in the same manner as he pointed to a second item on the handout. Mariah observed and asked, “And pathogens?” Mrs. Nelson replied again, “Yup. Those are the ones.”

By maintaining her gaze on Shaffer and actually interrupting Mrs. Nelson when she told Shaffer to answer by
pointing on the paper, Mariah ensured that Shaffer would have the opportunity to answer her question. In fact, she demonstrated her ability to seek out conversations with Shaffer, which she knew he did not often initiate, when she asked him if he was asking her about her project. The interaction would not have occurred without her work to prolong and protect the conversation.

Megan demonstrated similar redirection when I unintentionally put her in the position of speaking for Shaffer. One afternoon early in the study I asked Megan which other classmates I should interview. She replied, “Um, I don’t know.” I mentioned that there seemed to be some friendly classmates in both math and science with Shaffer. She replied hesitantly, “Yeah.” She paused and then said, “Well, let’s ask Shaffer. I’ll ask Shaffer who he thinks you should talk to.” Megan leaned in to Shaffer who sat at the table finishing his lunch and asked him who he wanted me to talk to. Shaffer looked up at her as she extended her right hand to support his typing. She stood behind him and to his right, leaning in to support his right hand to type his responses that he typed first and then read: “Megan.” Megan replied, “Okay. I am going to do it. Who else?” He typed and read, “Mariah.” Megan replied, “Okay, who else?” He typed and read, “Shaffer.”

Megan could easily have mentioned a few classmates with whom Shaffer was friendly, but she immediately felt uncomfortable speaking for him. By redirecting my question to him, she demonstrated both a respect for and a belief in his opinion.

Though I only observed them a few times, Stephanie appeared to be very adept at redirecting questions and comments to Joshua. Possibly due to his visible disabilities, peers and adults alike often looked at Stephanie when speaking to Joshua and/or they asked her how he was doing. Stephanie’s response was consistent. She smiled and simply said, “He can hear you. Ask him.” When they did, she monitored his response and often rephrased questions or offered choices so he could point to an answer.

### Discussion

When I analyzed these data reflecting upon how these young people interacted as friends, I thought about how Sue Rubin (in Biklen, 2005), a woman with autism, described her friends: “My friends know when I need time alone and when they need to get me out of my autistic mind and interact with the world around us” (p. 89). Similarly, Judith Heumann (in Pogrebin, 1987), a recent World Bank Advisor on Disability and Development and longtime disability rights activist, reflected on the importance of her friends understanding her experiences and providing what she called friendship work:

> Good friends are conscious of the fact that a movie theater or concert hall has to be accessible before I can join them; they share my anger and frustration if it’s not. They understand why I’m not crazy about big parties where all the nondisabled are standing up and I’m at ass level. It makes me able to function more as an equal within the group if people sit down to talk to me. I can’t pretend I’m part of things if I can’t hear anyone. I don’t want to not be invited to large parties—I just want people to be sensitive to my needs. (p. 220)

Using Heumann’s words, friendship work is distinguished from one-sided help in that it entails being sensitive to one’s situation and results in mutually desired social outcomes.

The daily enactments of the participants’ friendships included meaningful connections, shared humor, and friendship work. The concept of friendship work arose out of the participants’ friendship talk. Megan and Mariah had stressed that their friendships with Shaffer meant more because they were harder to enact and maintain. In this study, friendship work reflected the participants recognizing and negotiating specific difficulties with social interactions and included figuring out how to interact together, supporting each other during interactions, and planning to spend time together. It is complex work to recognize and negotiate specific difficulties with social interactions because each person experiences disability differently and each group of friends develops their own social dynamics. For example, Stephanie recognized the intentionality in the actions Joshua could control, such as smiling and reaching out to her. Alternately, Megan and Mariah learned that some of Shaffer’s actions, such as repeating their phrases and not returning their greetings, did not reflect what he was thinking or intending. And Jocelyn learned to persist with Emily to get beneath the surface aggression and the anxiety.

The friendship work became second nature to the participants so that all of the supports melded together with the social interactions to become part of the fabric of these friendships. The individuals without disabilities engaged in more friendship work, which suggests a lack of reciprocity in the relationship. However, the help reflected a local understanding (Kliwer & Biklen, 2001) of their friends, an insider knowledge that transformed it into natural supports that were provided simply because they were necessary. Within the context of their friendships, these natural supports did not resemble one-way help described as benevolence (Kunc, 1992). The friendship work was practical, subtle, and provided during the flow of social interaction. In this sense, it was akin to any type of spontaneous social support provided by one individual to another, such as holding a door open for someone pushing a child in a stroller and tapping someone on the shoulder when it is their turn in the coffee line. These social supports are often unmarked when provided between individuals without disabilities, which illuminates the interdependence between all people. Moreover, the participants with disabilities contributed to the relationships in...
The participants in this study chose to be friends, not to have somefimes blurred this disfinction. Friendship facilitation requires that students with and without severe disabilities learn and interact in the same places during school. Friendship facilitation should include effective modeling by educators of supports that can become friendship work by students. Students with and without disabilities can and should be collaborators with educators in discussing the mechanics of social interactions and sharing information related to friendship work that can facilitate the development and maintenance of meaningful relationships. Friendship facilitation strategies should focus on the dynamics of interactions so that students with and without disabilities know how to interact with the people they want to.

References


Received: July 19, 2010
Final Acceptance: January 4, 2011
Editor in Charge: Roberta Schnorr