Helping or hindering: the role of secondary educators in facilitating friendship opportunities among students with and without autism or developmental disability

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Helping or hindering: the role of secondary educators in facilitating friendship opportunities among 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 between three groups of young adults; each group includes an individual with autism or severe disability and nondisabled high school students. The most prominent finding identified in the data was that educators affected opportunities for social interactions between students with and without autism or severe disability. Educator influence on social participation included factors that decreased interactions, such as missed opportunities for social interactions and social consequences of academic supports. Educator influence also included factors that increased interactions, specifically four strategies to increase social interactions and facilitate possible friendships or maintain existing friendships between students with and without autism or severe disability.

Keywords: friendships; autism; developmental disability; high school; inclusive education

For many, school is an opportunity to see friends more than it is about learning (Staub 1998). All children and youth have a fundamental drive to *connect* to other human beings in positive, nurturing ways (Thompson and Grace 2001). However, many students and adults with disabilities are lonely and report that they do not have friends (Amado 2004; Jobling, Moni, and Nolan 2000; Jorgensen, Schuh, and Nisbet 2006; McVilly et al. 2006a, 2006b).

Loneliness and lack of friends negatively affect self-esteem and quality of life (Jerome et al. 2002; McVilly et al. 2006a, 2006b). When students with developmental disabilities do not have any friends at school, this loneliness impacts the entire family (Overton and Rausch 2002).

Loneliness and lack of friends are much more prevalent during high school than earlier years. Much of the literature stresses that social interactions are more prevalent during the elementary years than in secondary school settings (Carter and Hughes 2005; Carter et al. 2005; Cutts and Sigafoos 2001; McVilly et al. 2006a, 2006b; Strully and Strully 1985; Staub 1998). A key factor contributing to this increased loneliness is that the structure and focus of secondary school settings are far less academically and socially interactive than elementary settings. In the USA, high schools are largely structured by and for adults without much time for students to direct their own

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interactions (Milner 2004; Shukla, Kennedy, and Cushing 1999). Schnorr (1997) found that the peak times for student social interactions in secondary settings consisted of a collection of fleeting moments before and between classes, during seat-work following a lesson, during breaks and transitions and during work on shared activities. As Naraian (2008, 540) quite appropriately suggests, 'the institutional narrative in the [US] high school setting left most of its members largely disconnected and disempowered'.

The presence of an adult educator (teacher, teacher assistant, 1:1 aide or therapist) often creates an additional barrier to social interactions between students with and without disabilities (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren 2005; Giangreco, Luiselli, and MacFarland 1997). Peer interactions by students with severe disabilities increased when they were supported by classmates rather than educators (Carter et al. 2007). However, adult modelling has also been important to the development of friendships between students with and without developmental disabilities (Hamre-Nietupski et al. 1994; Snell and Janney 2000). Specifically, adult modelling was important for students without disabilities to move beyond helper roles with their classmates with developmental disabilities and to develop reciprocal friendships (Meyer et al. 1998; Williams and Downing 1998). Special educators facilitated social interactions while supporting intermediate school students with and without severe disabilities in peer tutor (Shukla, Kennedy, and Cushing 1998) and peer support (Carter et al. 2007) dyads within general education classes.

Students with and without autism or severe disability may not connect without adult support. Kluth (2003, 91) explains:

> Many students with autism who are being educated alongside their peers without identi- fied disabilities are indicating that they need more than an inclusive classroom to feel successful; students with autism are increasingly asking teachers to facilitate the devel- opment of friendships and provide them with access to social opportunities.

Barriers to friendships result when students with autism or severe disability do not experience social opportunities akin to their peers and when they are not provided the academic support or opportunity to communicate and interact with their peers (Kliewer 1998).

Educators can successfully facilitate social interactions or they may present barri- ers to the development of friendships between students with and without disabilities.

In this interpretivist qualitative study, I explored the contexts and dynamics of social participation (Koster et al. 2009) among three groups of young adults with and without disabilities. Recognising the continued lack of such friendships for many individuals especially in high school, as well as the potential for educators to *help or hinder* the development of reciprocal and meaningful relationships, my research questions were (1) What are the contexts of these friendships? In other words, how and where did the students become friends? (2) How do educators affect interactions and/or friendships? (3) What educator strategies, if any, can increase interactions between students? By studying existing friendships and the factors that led to friendships, I hoped to identify new strategies and new considerations for implementing known strategies that contribute to the field. Professionally, I am a teacher educator looking for effective strategies to share with pre-service teachers. Personally, I am the older brother to a sibling with a severe disability who does not have any friends.

Methodology

This is an interpretivist qualitative study that explores the contexts of friendships between three groups of young adults; each group includes an individual with autism or severe disability and high school students without disabilities. I hoped to learn from the participants themselves rather than test a specific hypothesis while controlling for variables. Recognising the multiple, socially constructed meanings of 'friendship' and 'severe disability', I adhered to Ferguson, Ferguson, and Taylor's (1992, 6) description of the goal of interpretivist research to 'describe, interpret, and understand'.

Participants

In this study I engaged in purposeful sampling (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Merriam 2002). Merriam (2002, 12) explains that, 'Since qualitative inquiry seeks to understand the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants, it is important to select a sample from which the most can be learned'. Since payment or obligation of any kind undermines the choice to become friends (Strully and 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 regional and national US disability listservs. The description asked people to forward it on to others they knew who might be interested to reflect a snowball sampling approach as well. All participants could 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). Additional participants include their educators and families. This study followed the US federal guidelines regarding participant consent and data collection procedures.

Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah (all names are pseudonyms) are seniors at Central High School, a small, suburban public school. 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 honour 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 are nondisabled. They are both active members of the senior class and are looking forward to college.

Shaffer interacted closely with three educators at Central High School. Mrs Cruz was Shaffer's communication facilitator in math, while Mrs Nelson filled the same role in all other classes. Mrs Smith, a special education teacher, was Shaffer's case

Table 1.   Summary of students' descriptive information.

Name	Setting, grade	Disability label/status	Mode of communication	Number of years been friends
Shaffer	Central HS general education with special education services; 12th grade	Autism	Types, reads what he has typed, and speaks some words as he types and spontaneously	One year (classmates since first grade)
Megan	Central HS general education; 12th grade	Nondisabled	Speaks	One year (classmates since first grade)
Mariah	Central HS general education; 12th grade	Nondisabled	Speaks	One year (classmates since first grade)
Emily	After-school dance troupe; Early 20s	Autism	Speaks; tends not to initiate with others	Six years
Jocelyn	After-school dance troupe; 12th grade	Nondisabled	Speaks	Six years
Joshua	East HS special education; 10th grade	Menkes Syndrome; wheelchair user	Facial expressions, physical interactions; does not speak	Five years
Stephanie	East HS general education; 10th grade	Nondisabled	Speaks	Five years

manager. She was also the faculty advisor for a student diversity group at the school. All three women were 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 young women with disabilities and nondisabled young women, Mrs Jones set out to combine two youth groups she led in a participatory and inclusive after-school activity. She enlisted Mrs Paul, an adult coworker and friend, to be choreographer.

Jocelyn is a thoughtful, quiet young woman who is nondisabled, and is a senior in a rural public high school. Emily is a young woman in her early 20s who enjoys riding horses, and, in her mother's words, 'has autism'. Mrs Jones and Mrs Paul explained to me that Jocelyn and Emily were immediately drawn to one another as dancers and friends. Emily talks, but she tends not to initiate conversation or interaction with others. She recently finished high school and was not working or attending college courses. She is the only individual with autism in the group.

Stephanie and Joshua are sophomores at East High School, a mid-sized suburban public high school. Stephanie is an outgoing young woman with an easygoing nature who is nondisabled. 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. Stephanie and Joshua have been friends since they met as reading partners in the same inclusive

upper elementary class. From then, their lives evolved very differently. Stephanie followed the general education curriculum in classes with her peers, while Joshua received special education services in a separate self-contained class.

Data collection

I entered the field where high school students with and without disabilities interacted with each other, and I collected descriptive, qualitative data through ethnographic methods. I conducted observations in the participants' high schools and after-school activities, and conducted semi-structured interviews with them as my primary data-collecting techniques (Bogdan and Biklen 2003). I set out to complete at least five observations with each group or dyad of participants during a six-month period of one school year. I conducted 20 observations of two to three hours each at Central High School with Shaffer, Megan and Mariah. I conducted 19 observations of two hours each with the Rainbow Troupe during their weekly Monday rehearsals and their annual Spring Concert. Since they joined the study after it had started, and they live out of state, six hours away, I conducted five observations with Joshua and Stephanie, each one lasting two to three hours. 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 and learned about their social history to a satisfactory saturation point.

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 compiled over 665 pages of field notes from 44 total observations in my three settings (Central HS – 280 pages, Rainbow Troupe – 320 pages, East HS – 65 pages).

In addition to the observations, which included casual conversations with participants, I also conducted several longer, semi-structured interviews with participants in each of the three settings. Questions asked in the study included:

- How did you meet your friends?
- Tell me more about your friendship with [name].
- How did you become friends with [name]?

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, Central – 36 and East – 10), which added to the field notes, yielded 808 total pages of data.

Data analysis

As advocated by scholars in qualitative and teacher research, (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Hubbard and Power 1999) inductive data analysis began as data were collected and occurred even more intensively after all data were collected. Analysis of each participant observation field note and interview transcript contributed to developing and further honing the framework with which I entered the field for subsequent observations. In this sense the inductive analysis followed the constant comparative method (Bogdan and Biklen 2003). Using categorical coding, I developed over 100 separate

codes describing and organising data by keywords or phrases (e.g. barrier to friendship; missed opportunity; separate places; strategy-teacher; social time; acting as mentor; strong connections; building a bridge).

By categorising data into primary and secondary codes, I was able to collapse the codes into 20 categories, compare the experiences of participants in the three settings and identify emerging themes. Of these, seven categories focused on strategies, six on barriers to social interactions, five on definitions and enactments of friendship, and two on school environment. This manuscript reports on the most prominent themes, paying particular attention to the impact of educators.

Methodological triangulation was employed to verify the qualitative analysis. Data were collected over an extended period of time. I used interviews to clarify events 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. Investigator triangulation was met by engaging in dialogue with fellow researchers as both external auditors (no knowledge of study) and peer debriefers (knowledge of study).

Key themes

The perspectives and experiences of the students in this study suggest several important considerations for those interested in supporting friendships between high school students with and without autism or severe disability. Educators can affect the social interactions between students in a variety of ways. Instructional choices and the way special education services are delivered can result in missed opportunities, misinterpretations of students as less capable than they are and fewer interactions, or they can lead to increased and reciprocal interactions. In short, there are social consequences of academic supports. Educator influence on student friendships included two categories of factors that decreased interactions and also included multiple factors that increased interactions, specifically four strategies employed by educators.

Factors that decreased social interactions – missed opportunities

The peak social times at both East and Central High Schools were before and after class, in the hallways between classes, during small group work in class, and especially at lunch, the longest stretch of unstructured student social time during the day. Yet, students with disabilities were often separate from their peers without disabilities during these times. Joshua and his classmates with severe disabilities were often prompted by their educators to wait at their tables after lunch when the bell rang and nondisabled students flooded the halls, talking, laughing and rushing to class. The students with severe disabilities did not leave until most of the other students had left the cafeteria. Two students with Down syndrome pushed the two students in wheelchairs, including Joshua. Walking down halls now empty, they were a separate group closely monitored by adults, and they did not experience any opportunity for social interactions.

Similarly, the Central High School hallway featured a social hum between classes that Shaffer missed because he was slow to leave his prior class. One afternoon the bell rang to end science class. Most students left immediately. Mrs Nelson spoke with the teacher, and Shaffer remained seated. Mrs Nelson told Shaffer to put his books in

his bag and get ready for the next class. It seemed that he was waiting for her or needed her prompt in order to initiate his movement to leave. The halls were empty when he walked to his next class, thus missing one of the few social opportunities during his day.

Factors that decreased social interactions – type of academic participation

Decisions about instruction made by Shaffer's teachers resulted in different levels of academic participation. In addition to helping or hindering the direct interactions, these decisions contributed to perceptions of Shaffer as a potential friend or not.

In calculus, Shaffer's teacher asked questions during whole-class instruction. This worked for many students, but it did not accommodate Shaffer. Mrs Cruz identified the problem: 'She lets them yell out their answers, so Shaffer can't ever really get one in.' Shaffer's typing was much slower compared to students yelling out answers; so, he looked like he was unable to participate, sitting quietly next to an adult who took notes for him.

Even when he was supported to participate, it still took longer for Shaffer to do so than most of his classmates due to his experience of autism. During a science lecture, the teacher asked a question. Mrs Nelson excitedly tapped Shaffer on the arm whispering, 'Shaffer, you know this one. Raise your hand.' While four other students shot their hands quickly in the air, Shaffer's stayed at his side. The teacher called on one of the students with her hand raised and as she began to give her answer, Shaffer raised his left hand slowly. Mrs Nelson tapped him again whispering, 'Put it down. Too late.'

Shaffer's history class featured a balance of small group work, class discussions and guided note taking. Shaffer's teacher ensured that he had the opportunity to participate by not only asking him questions directly, but also allowing him the time to give his response and/or alerting him of an upcoming question so that he could have time to prepare for it. One afternoon the teacher reviewed a section on state government by asking the class summary questions. She asked, 'In [our state], we have four voter qualifications. Shaffer, what are they?' There was a silent pause of about five seconds. A female student raised her hand and said, 'I know.' The teacher replied, 'Shaffer's got it. We'll wait for him.' Shaffer found the question on his homework page with some prompting from Mrs Nelson and read his answer aloud.

These performances were 'read' by his classmates resulting in both immediate and potential future social consequences. In calculus and science the rapid questions that were sufficient for others did not allow Shaffer to participate. His classmates saw him only as the silent young man in the front row staring straight ahead, tapping his thumbs together. Quite differently, Shaffer's history teacher predetermined that she ask him a question at least once during each class. She modelled how to wait for Shaffer's participation, showing the students that she valued his contributions. He participated as his classmates did, which is fundamental to being viewed as a potential friend.

Stephanie and Joshua did not see much of each other at school because they were in different classes that were actually in separate parts of the building. The special education classes were housed in a far corridor on the other side of the gym and cafeteria from the sophomore lockers and classrooms. Stephanie spoke often of needing to find, create and actually fight for time to see Joshua within the school's system of delivering special education services separately.

Factors that increased social interactions – strategies

One of the strongest themes in the study was that adults could successfully support students with and without disabilities to interact socially and develop or maintain friendships through subtle enactment of individualised strategies. There were four strategies present in different forms across the participant groups:

(1) build bridges (between students who may not naturally interact),
(2) adult as mentor,
(3) student as mentor and
(4) fade back, and classmates fill the spaces.

Build bridges

Building bridges took many forms, but it reflected an adult doing something intentional – and individualised – to help form a connection between students who did not interact together on their own. Shaffer stressed the importance of teachers helping him to connect with his classmates:

> I am thinking that people only can have the greatest feelings of security where the teachers are having the intelligence to be a bridge that can cross over the distances of inconsolation of the sad feelings … I think it's so difficult to initiate conversation questions if you don't have a teacher in the introduction. I look to an adult to really make the bridge.

Toward the end of Shaffer's junior year his special education case manager asked one of Shaffer's classmates from his junior year math class about working with him in calculus and during a free period their senior year. This classmate seemed friendly and interacted with Shaffer more than their other classmates did. This classmate was Megan:

> I thought it would be really fun and interesting and something new. As it turned out Shaffer didn't need any help with math – he was actually better than I am at it! He is smarter than me in math; so we just started talking and that's how we started hanging out. He just needed someone by his side. We ended up just hanging out during free periods. So our partnership turned into a friendship, and now he is a friend that I feel makes my world a better place.

Building bridges can take the form of almost any individualised strategy intentionally implemented to help foster social interactions and relationships.

Building bridges can be most effective with multiple strategies or components simultaneously implemented. The second aspect of the building bridges strategy at Central was enacted during Shaffer's senior year. Mrs Smith contacted students in a group focused on diversity issues and offered her room for meetings. She supported Shaffer and several other students with disabilities to participate, and she hosted holiday parties with lots of great snacks, which actually led to an increase in student participation.

In addition to being a social opportunity, Mrs Smith felt that students in this group focused on diversity issues would be more welcoming of students with disabilities. Mariah interacted with Shaffer in science class, but also within this group of students:

> I have been coming to [the diversity group], and I mean, I think as soon as you make the bridge, as soon as you start talking to him (Shaffer), you're gonna want to, you know. It's just building the bond between you.

Participating together in this group allowed them to get to know each other and to realise that they wanted to continue spending more time together. Their participation in this group was not the end in itself; so, it did not stop when meetings ended.

By forming Rainbow Troupe, Mrs Jones connected two separate groups of young women. She became the literal bridge between these two groups because she recognised the irony of running separate youth groups for young women with and without disabilities while being frustrated at their lack of social connections. She stressed that she did not create a specific friendship group, but a group based on shared interests (dance) in which there were plenty of natural opportunities to interact and to connect socially.

Adult as mentor

Stephanie and Joshua were the best of friends with smiles, laughter and the natural ease of interactions that emerges from shared histories. However, Stephanie felt unsure of how to interact with Joshua when she first started visiting him at the nursing home where he lived.

> When I first started, I wasn't sure what he was supposed to do or what to do if something happened. Now I know how to act and I know when he doesn't like something. It came with more time here with him and talking to my mom, too. She's great. And now I hate it when people talk to him like he's a baby. That happens a lot. Oh! I can't stand that! I get so mad. I'm like, 'He's a sophomore just like me.' What else? He gags when he gets scared or mad. I know who to talk to and what to do if anything ever goes wrong.

Stephanie needed to learn about the things that Joshua liked and did not like because he could not tell her himself. She worried about safety issues especially. She was not sure she could 'just chill out' with him like with anyone else because of various unknowns regarding his care, his support needs and his ways of interacting. She learned these things by spending time with Joshua, but she had already possessed a sense of comfort with severe disability generally because her mother worked as a special education administrator and acted as a mentor for her.

Stephanie further explained the benefit of having a mentor as she answered my question about why other students did not interact with Joshua as much as she did:

> I think the biggest reason is fear of the unknown. Kids don't know what to do or say around Joshua. They have a fear of being in that situation, of not knowing what to do or doing something wrong. I had to take it slow at first. Basically, it's that fear of the unknown that most kids have if they've never done this.

Stephanie did not experience this so-called fear of the unknown as intensely as some of her peers because she benefited from her mother's support as a mentor.

Once a year, an autism consultant showed a short film about Shaffer's experience of autism and his typed communication. Classmates asked him questions. Both Megan and Mariah said that this defused anxiety because a lot of students did not intentionally ignore Shaffer, but they did not know how to approach him, and so they did not.

However, even after viewing the films, many students still found it difficult to approach Shaffer as Megan recalled:

> Erik asked me a question about why Shaffer twitches his hands. He said that someone said Shaffer twitched like that for a reason which wasn't the right reason. So I had to tell him why he does it, and then I told him that Shaffer really likes it when people ask him questions and are interested in autism and his life, but he was shy and didn't want to ask him himself.

Mariah offered an explanation as to the anxiety or trepidation Erik felt at the thought of talking directly to Shaffer:

> I mean I can understand like it would be tough, like, if they go up and obviously when you first say something to Shaffer he doesn't respond immediately, so, I think it's just difficult to realise for other people that he can communicate.

When they first started dancing together in Rainbow Troupe, Emily engaged in aggressive behaviours that would have turned off most peers. Jocelyn explains:

> She's come a very, very, very long way. And before, when she used to swear, hit or punch I could tell she was just nervous, and actually I can't remember if it ever scared me. It never scared me because that's, you know, how she reacts to things, you know, like, we react differently, and I just took it as it went. You know, sometimes she'd call me a pig and I'd be like, 'Yup, Emily. I am. Thanks for noticing,' and she'll laugh. She'll totally forget about it. If you get all upset about it, that'll make her upset more because she doesn't mean to do that.

Jocelyn's reaction reflects a deep understanding of such behaviours. Jocelyn became privy to such insider information by watching her mother in her role as a special educator and coordinator of adult services. She gained knowledge about difficult behaviours, in effect, preparing her to view Emily as a potential friend: 'I've always watched my mother deal with situations like what Emily was doing, so I knew what it was and how to handle it.'

Student as mentor

The third key strategy for facilitating social interactions builds off of the second strategy of adults acting as mentors to potential friends. The mentored student (from strategy 2) then became a mentor to her peers. Several of Stephanie's friends began to interact with Joshua after watching her interact so comfortably and confidently with him.

At Central High School this strategy played out as well. Shaffer explained how he and Mariah started spending time together: 'I mostly think the best thing was her following Megan.' Mariah had spent enough time with Shaffer in class and the diversity group over the years that she knew she wanted to continue to get to know him. Once she saw Megan interacting with him, she just stepped in and did the same.

Once the Rainbow Troupe began dancing, Mrs Jones developed a waiting list of young women with and without disabilities. Jocelyn stressed the importance of this type of mentoring: 'I think I would start being friends with [classmates with disabilities] and encourage people to join us.' Jocelyn recognised the power of a peer mentor, feeling that when her classmates watched her they would be more willing and able to do the same.

Fade back, and classmates fill the spaces

Possibly the clearest manifestation of how educators can affect social interactions and friendships, adults either prevented interactions or cleared the way for students to interact by literally stepping back themselves. Joshua and Stephanie experienced negative consequences from Joshua's 1:1 adult support. These adults were constantly by his side and determined his social life because they moved his wheelchair, seemingly 'in charge' of him throughout the day. Failing to recognise his social connection with Stephanie, they often became barriers to their interactions. Stephanie felt that they could not perceive them as being friends:

> I have a hard time with some of the aides. I like most of them and I love that they are there helping, but I don't agree with some of them the way they, they don't think our relationship is the same as with my other friends … Maybe they don't know how close we are or think he should be working all the time or be with them only … Maybe they can't imagine us being friends.

Quite the other extreme, Mrs Nelson perfected the art of strategically backing away from Shaffer with the goal of increasing his interactions with peers. She explained:

> When Mariah is there and working together with Shaffer like that, I try to get out of the way to let them interact on their own without me there in the way … I always look for times when he can work with classmates and I can get out of the way … Whenever there is group work then I try to do things, try to kind of hold back and, you know, maybe initiate a little something, kind of prompt Shaffer a little bit but then try to let him roll with it, try to get it so it's more him speaking to the kids.

Shaffer appreciated these efforts because he needed them to engage in the interactions he did desire. He explains:

> We are willing and ready to connect with other kids, and adults must quietly step into the background, camouflaging their help as a tiger who may hide in full view. It's the needed disguise of the adult who smooths the way with the friendship, then stands back in the shadows, observing the complicated dance of steps taking you to the feeling of confidence.

Conclusion

Many of the strategies described above are not new to the field, yet the ways they were implemented and the contexts within which they were enacted represent key considerations for educators interested in supporting friendships between high school students with and without autism or developmental disabilities. These considerations include (1) examining one's own attitudes about students with disabilities, and (2) individualising strategies to facilitate friendships in natural settings.

Educators who do not adequately address the social participation of their students can present barriers or inherently sabotage their efforts because as Causton-Theoharis (2009, 37) stresses, 'Effective adult support requires finesse, subtlety, and elegance'. The context of the friendships included educators holding the highest of expectations for students with severe disabilities. Educators recognised capability and desire for friendship by their students and actively supported them to initiate and sustain inter-

actions in each setting. Teachers who presume competence (Biklen et al. 2005) can be effective in connecting students labelled with autism with their peers (Kasa-Hendrickson 2005). When educators do not presume competence or do not recognise their role in social participation, it can result in the missed opportunities and social consequences of academic supports.

The strategies employed in this study were individualised for each friendship group within natural settings rather than being a general and decontextualised approach such as with a friendship club or 'buddy group'. This was a key factor in the successful development of reciprocal relationships, reflecting the mutual nature and affection of the connection between friends (Lutfiyya 1991) as opposed to one-sided relationships or benevolence (Van der Klift and Kunc 2002). The friendships in this study also provide an example of Bogdan and Taylor's (1989, 135) 'social construction of humanness' in that the nondisabled participants inherently presumed the competence of their friends through their social interactions. In this study the three stories of friendship included active support by educators. Since the immediate presence of an educator by the side of a student with autism or developmental disability was a barrier to social interactions and reflective of symbolic exclusion (Bentley 2008), an effective strategy to facilitate friendships is for the paraeducator to strategically back away from the student when other classmates are near (Causton-Theoharis and Malmgren 2005). This study confirmed findings by Giangreco, Luiselli, and MacFarland (1997) that when adults back away from a student classmates fill that space, enacting symbolic inclusion (Bentley 2008). What this study adds is how to implement this important strategy. Mrs Nelson faded away from Shaffer as often as possible by conjuring fictional tasks. She also pulled other students in as she backed away. Based on their experiences with Shaffer during his senior year, Mrs Cruz and Mrs Nelson saw their job differently. Rather than constantly being by Shaffer's side, not only did they provide academic and communication supports as needed, but they also backed off whenever possible *and* connected Shaffer to his classmates as they did. With this slight change in how they perceived their jobs they still provided essential special education services, but in a way that enhanced possibilities for social participation.

One of the bigger surprises in the data was the effect of a family member acting as a mentor to a student without disabilities. Both Stephanie and Jocelyn learned how to respectfully and naturally interact with someone with a disability from their mothers who each worked in related fields. They were privy to insider information that answered practical questions about interacting together and overcame potential effects of stigmatisation and ableism. Thus, the strategies of adults (family members or educators) acting as mentors for students who seem interested in a peer with severe disabilities – and then experienced students acting as mentors for their peers – proved to be highly effective. Knowing both the personal anguish and professional disappointment due to the isolation and loneliness that too many students face, it is my sincere hope that these themes further the ongoing discourse of social participation in high schools.

Notes on contributor

Zachary Stephen Rossetti is an assistant professor in the Department of Curriculum & Teaching at Boston University, Boston. His research focuses on the belonging of people with disabilities, and specifically examines school and community inclusion, friendships and typed communication.

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