

Descriptors of Friendship Between Secondary Students With and Without Autism or Intellectual and Developmental Disability

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Abstract

This article reports findings from an interpretivist, qualitative study exploring the connections and dynamics of friendship among three groups of secondary school-aged young adults. Each group included an individual with autism or intellectual and developmental disabilities who had extensive or pervasive support needs, and at least one high school student without disabilities. Data were collected through naturalistic observation and semi-structured interviews of the friends in two public high schools and one after-school dance program. Data were analyzed inductively to examine how the students enacted their friendships on a daily basis and how they made meaning of their friendships practically and conceptually. The thematic findings included (a) excitement and motivation, (b) shared humor, (c) normalized supports, (d) mutual benefits, and (e) differing conceptions of friendships. Implications of the findings, including descriptors of friendship and a broader conceptualization of reciprocity, are discussed.

Keywords

friendships, autism, intellectual and developmental disabilities, secondary education

Friendships are very significant in everyone's lives. Adults with friends have been found more likely to be happy (Myers, 2000), as are adolescents who report interpersonal attraction and liking of their peers (Cheng & Furnham, 2002). Adolescents with friends are more likely to feel a sense of belonging, experience opportunities for social integration and communication, and enjoy higher educational outcomes (Thompson & Grace, 2001; Vaquera & Kao, 2008). Adolescence is a period when friendships and peer relations move to center stage, and dyadic relationships become more important than group acceptance (Sadowski, 2003; Sullivan, 1953). Consistent with Sullivan's (1953) theory, researchers found that perceived positive friendship quality was the best predictor of adolescent emotional adjustment (Demir & Urberg, 2004). Adolescent peer relationships provide a context for developing interpersonal social skills necessary for future friendships and romantic relationships (Connolly, Furman, & Konarski, 2000; McElhaney, Antonishak, & Allen, 2008). Recognizing the importance of friendships in adolescence and early adulthood, the present study was guided by the initial inquiry of examining the experience of friendships between secondary students with and without autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or intellectual and developmental disability (IDD). In other words, what does friendship look like when one friend does

not speak, uses a wheelchair, or needs extensive support from others?

Friendships and support for friendships are of particular importance related to students with ASD or IDD. Secondary students with ASD and IDD were among those least likely to be involved with friends compared with students with other disabilities (Wagner, Cadwallader, Garza, & Cameto, 2004). In one study, adolescents with ASD experienced lower quality social networks and friendships, as well as greater loneliness, compared with neurotypical peers (Locke, Ishijima, Kasari, & London, 2010). In addition, high school students with intellectual disability in inclusive settings have been found to interact more frequently with peers with intellectual disability than with peers without disabilities despite being in physical proximity (Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Hughes et al., 1999).

Friendships and social interactions between students with and without IDD are thought to be more prevalent

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during the elementary years (Carter & Hughes, 2005; Staub, 1998). Inclusive education at the secondary level has resulted in increased social interactions, social contact, social support, and the size of social networks between students with and without disabilities compared with those in separate special education settings (Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997). However, inclusion alone may not be enough to result in friendships without educator intervention to facilitate more focused, intimate, and/or repeated friendship opportunities (Carter, Asmus, & Moss, 2013; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Kluth, 2003; Matheson, Olsen, & Weisner, 2007). Despite increased rates of inclusion overall, only 17% of students receiving services under the category of ID and 39% of students receiving services under the category of autism spent more than 80% of the day in the general education classroom, and almost half (48.8%) of students with ID and one third (33.7%) of students with autism spent less than 40% of the day in the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, Office of Special Education Programs, 2013). Among students receiving special education services, students with ID and autism are most frequently assigned direct support from a special education paraprofessional in a one-to-one instructional assignment (Giangreco, Suter, & Doyle, 2010; Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Researchers have cautioned against the possible barrier adult proximity can be to friendship formation, especially by paraprofessionals (Giangreco, 2010; Giangreco & Broer, 2005), and the tendency for students to interact with individually assigned adults rather than peers (Chung, Carter, & Sisco, 2012).

How students perceive and enact friendships is important due to the potential of disability-related stigma, specifically of the disability becoming a master status, a sociological term for one's social position that becomes a primary identifying characteristic (Goffman, 1963). Students with IDD who face disability-related stigma may be viewed by others primarily as a disabled person rather than a person first, which affects the nature and quality of their social relationships. Friendships between students with and without ASD or IDD (Snell & Janney, 2000) and among students with IDD (Day & Harry, 1999; Matheson et al., 2007) have been described as reciprocal and meaningful relationships that occur spontaneously. Compared with definitions of friendship for students without disabilities, these definitions highlight reciprocity, but also emphasize meaningfulness and spontaneous or natural development over affection and fun. These relationships are not "helping the handicapped" (Murray-Seegert, 1989, p. 87); that is, they are not based on benevolence (i.e., "special friends") or one-way helping, which are viewed as distinct from reciprocity (Turnbull, Blue-Banning, & Pereira, 2000; Van der Klift & Kunc, 2002). For example, in a study of typically developing, middle school boys' perspectives on

relationships with students with disabilities, reciprocity was one of three key components of facilitating positive peer relationships (Kalymon, Gettinger, & Hanley-Maxwell, 2010). The participants emphasized that relationships should be mutual and voluntary to avoid frustration and negative attitudes.

Some researchers and authors have suggested that when students without disabilities receive some form of payment (e.g., money, class credit, or a volunteer experience), it is not considered friendship because the payment signifies an external reason for the relationship, affecting the extent it is reciprocal and voluntary (Lutfiyya, 1991; Schaffner & Buswell, 1992). Strully and Strully (1985) stressed that a nondisabled person cannot be paid to be a friend, and cannot be a friend if paid. Martin, Jorgensen, and Klein (1998) distinguished between those paid to be with individuals with disabilities—who may develop close relationships with them—and those who freely choose to interact as friends. Taylor and Bogdan (1989) similarly highlighted the element of choice rather than obligation in such friendships, linking payment to obligatory helper roles rather than reciprocal and freely chosen peer roles.

Extant research related to friendships between secondary students with and without IDD or ASD has examined interventions to teach social skills (e.g., Bellini & Akillian, 2007), interventions to promote social interactions (e.g., Carter, Sisco, Chung, & Stanton-Chapman, 2010; Okilwa & Shelby, 2010), and perspectives on friendship by teachers, parents, and students without disabilities (e.g., Han & Chadsey, 2004; Overton & Rausch, 2002). Fewer studies have focused directly on what friendships look like and how the individuals make meaning of their own interactions and relationships (e.g., Day & Harry, 1999; Evans & Meyer, 2001). Recognizing the important but persistent lack of friendships for many secondary students with ASD and IDD, as well as the potential for relationships that are not quite friendships (i.e., one-sided or obligatory), I explored how secondary students with and without ASD or IDD enacted their friendships each day and made meaning of their interactions and relationships. The following research questions were examined:

Research Question 1: How do secondary students with and without ASD or IDD who identify as friends enact and make meaning of their daily interactions?

Research Question 2: How do they perceive their overall friendships with each other?

Method

In this qualitative study, I used interpretivist research techniques (Ferguson, Ferguson, & Taylor, 1992) to examine enactments and perspectives of friendship in three suburban, public secondary school settings. I adhered to Ferguson

et al.'s (1992) goal of interpretivist research to “describe, interpret, and understand” (p. 6). I phenomenologically explored how the participants made meaning of their experiences as opposed to quantifying them. All study procedures were approved by the Boston University Institutional Review Board.

Being the only researcher engaged in this study, my experiences and perspectives were critical components of this process. As the older sibling of someone who is very outgoing and has pervasive support needs due to cerebral palsy (spastic quadriplegia), I am interested in friendships and the range of relationships between students with and without disabilities. My brother was popular in high school, but he did not have friends with whom he spent time outside of school. As a former special education teacher and inclusion facilitator for students with ASD and IDD, many of whom communicated through augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) techniques, I was able to interview and develop rapport with all participants. My personal and professional goals align with the focus on learning more about how to support friendships between students with and without disabilities.

Setting and Participants

This study utilized the purposeful sampling technique of criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 2002) to identify three established friendship dyads of secondary students in which one friend experienced ASD or IDD. I sent a one-page description of my study via email to local school districts and agencies supporting individuals with ASD and IDD and their families (e.g., Parent Information Center), asking recipients to forward it to others in a snowball sampling approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). All recipients had the option to contact me if interested in the study. Several respondents contacted me about participating, but they indicated their students or children with ASD or IDD did not have a friend so they were screened out because they did not meet the criteria. Three others contacted me describing students whom they felt very strongly were close friends. I selected them for participation in the study because of the respondents' affirmative responses to screening questions about friendship (e.g., spend time out of school, choose to spend time together) as well as the intensity of their convictions. All decisions were confirmed by the students through self-identification as friends when I first met them. Thus, the study participants included three groups of friends.

Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah (all participant and setting names are pseudonyms) were seniors at Central High School, a suburban public school in the northeastern United States with just under 700 students. Shaffer describes himself as “a young man with autism.” He is an honor roll student who attends general education classes, therapies, and

sensory breaks with 1:1 support from a paraeducator. Shaffer types to communicate, reads what he has typed, and has extensive support needs (Luckasson et al., 2002). Megan and Mariah are both outgoing young women who play varsity lacrosse and identify as nondisabled. They were friendly, but not friends with each other. They each held a separate friendship with Shaffer; they occasionally hung out together as a trio in school, but they typically spent time together as a dyad outside of school (e.g., going out for burgers and to the museum, zoo, and school play).

Joshua and Stephanie were sophomores who attended East High School, a suburban public high school in the northeastern United States with just over 1,100 students. Joshua is an outgoing young man with a playful nature who has IDD and pervasive support needs (Luckasson et al., 2002). He is 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 all daily tasks. Stephanie is an outgoing young woman with an easy-going nature who does not have a disability. She was not part of a specific clique, which she often emphasized, and had friends of all ages. Her mother worked as a special education administrator in their home town, which was one town over from the high school.

Emily and Jocelyn danced together in an inclusive, after-school dance group in a rural town in the northeastern United States. The Rainbow Troupe consisted of 10 to 12 young women of secondary school age with and without disabilities. Emily was in her early 20s, having recently graduated from high school when she aged out of special education services. She has autism and extensive support needs (Luckasson et al., 2002). She walks and talks, but did not typically initiate conversation or interaction with others—except for Jocelyn. Jocelyn is a thoughtful, quiet young woman without a disability who was a senior in high school looking forward to graduation. Her mother worked in an agency providing services to adults with developmental disabilities.

Data Collection

I collected data using two qualitative procedures. Primarily, I conducted naturalistic observations of the students in their schools and the after-school dance program during 6 months over the course of 1 academic year. I conducted 20 observations of 2 to 3 hr each at Central High School during lunch, the classes before and after lunch, several holiday parties, and a science field trip; 19 observations of 2 hr each at weekly Rainbow Troupe rehearsals and four performances; and 5 observations of 3 hr each at East High School during lunch and free periods and also at the nursing home where Joshua resided. All observations were captured with more than 665 pages of descriptive and reflective field notes.

I also collected data through semi-structured interviews with the students. The semi-structured interview format included questions about how the participants became friends, what they typically did together, what was challenging, what each friend contributed to and received from the friendship, and how this friendship compared with their other friendships with individualized follow-up questions to participants' responses. All interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and checked against the recordings. The transcriptions (143 pages), including observer comments, were used as data.

Data Analysis

This study utilized symbolic interactionism as a theoretical and analytical framework. Symbolic interactionism is a sociological approach to studying human group life and understanding the social world that emphasizes naturalistic data gathering techniques and an interactional understanding of reality (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Symbolic interactionists see social reality as being interpreted through the relationships individuals construct and take part in during daily life (Blumer, 1969). In other words, people develop personal identities and social meanings through interacting with others and their environment. Adopting this framework means examining and understanding the lived experiences and resultant development of meaning from the perspective of those involved, that is, the study participants (Schwandt, 1994). This study focused on how the students enacted and understood their friendships, and thus each other, within their specific contexts and social histories. As well, I noted how the core principles of symbolic interactionism (meaning, language, and thought) played out during the interpretive processes of meaning making (Blumer, 1986) for the participants because each friendship group included someone with ASD or IDD who either experienced or was perceived to experience communicative and/or intellectual deficits.

Data analysis occurred both as data were collected and after all data were collected (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Analysis of each field note and transcript contributed to further honing the framework with which I entered the field for subsequent observations and interviews. In accordance with the framework of symbolic interactionism, I analyzed data inductively to maintain a focus on learning how the participants made meaning of their friendships. Utilizing the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), I adhered to a multi-stage process of open and axial, then selective, coding. This allowed for the systematic exploration of possible variations in codes, categories, and relationships until saturation was reached. Constant comparison guided the process of open coding in which I marked data units with key words or phrases, highlighting and organizing topics related to the research questions, those that were

frequently repeated, and those that suggested a unique participant perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I looked for patterns and relationships in these topics and compared them across each interview and observation, ultimately resulting in primary and secondary codes. During the axial coding stage, I identified emerging themes by focusing on connections between the primary and secondary codes, developing categories and subcategories, and examining relationships among categories. I refined codes and categories multiple times with input from colleagues who were fellow researchers. I collapsed the codes into five categories: Educator Strategies, Barriers to Friendship, Missed Opportunities, Perceptions and Enactments of Friendship, and School Environment. The selective coding stage included identifying a core finding around which the other categories and codes were structured to strengthen the theoretical framework and aid in presentation of findings. This article shares findings from the Perceptions and Enactments of Friendship and School Environment categories.

Trustworthiness. I engaged in several strategies to ensure trustworthiness of data analysis through triangulation of data (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). I collected data over an extended period of time (i.e., 6 months). I used interviews to clarify events I observed, and alternately looked for things in observations that were described during interviews. I also shared written data and summaries of data analysis with participants to engage in member checking. All participants except for Joshua could read and verify my data entry and analysis by spoken or typed responses. I read data excerpts and analysis to Joshua, and he responded with physical movement of his arm, facial expressions, and verbalizations. His special educator helped to interpret his responses and checked her interpretations with him. Finally, to enhance my process as a single researcher in this study, I engaged in constant dialogue with experienced qualitative researchers, receiving feedback about my analytic process and the themes I identified.

Results

The core finding in this qualitative research study of three groups of high school-aged friends, each involving an individual with ASD or IDD, was the perceived strength of their connections as friends. The participants in this study appeared to like each other, enjoy spending time together, and share an easygoing rapport when together. Their interactions did not seem forced, awkward, artificial, or hierarchical. In attempting the challenging task of describing their connections as friends, I identified several key themes across their enactments and perceptions of friendship. Themes related to the first research question about their daily enactments of friendship were as follows:

(a) excitement and motivation, (b) shared humor, and (c) normalized supports. Themes related to the second research question about their perceptions of their overall friendships included the following: (a) mutual benefits from their friendships and (b) differing conceptions of friendship.

“You Have to Want to”: Excitement and Motivation

The students interacted naturally and joyfully as peers. They seemed to enjoy spending time together, and they articulated the specific reasons they felt that way. Joshua and Stephanie consistently demonstrated mutual excitement and affection whenever they spent time together. The field note excerpt below in which Stephanie was waiting for Joshua to arrive was typical:

Joshua immediately scans the room, finding Stephanie with a huge smile. She smiles back and jokes, “Finally! Where have you been?!” She rubs his hair. Joshua smiles even more, excitedly straightening and sitting up in the wheelchair. The staff member pushes Joshua away from Stephanie momentarily as she backs him up next to her. He strains to look for her, and smiles as she comes back into his peripheral view on the right side. He flashes another huge smile once he is wheeled into place. She smiles and places her hand on his arm.

Emily and Jocelyn also demonstrated this excitement at seeing each other through smiles and hugs prior to dance rehearsals at the Rainbow Troupe. In fact, Emily completely changed her demeanor and expression from seemingly uninterested to ecstatic when Jocelyn arrived. Jocelyn, who was fairly stoic, seemed to relax and often smiled in response. Mariah, Megan, and Shaffer did not often display similar visible manifestations of excitement. Part of the reason for this was that Shaffer did not typically convey what he was thinking or feeling through spoken language and facial expressions. Thus, Mariah and Megan looked forward to and were curious about what he would type on his voice output communication aid (VOCA). His typing was much slower than spoken communication so the pacing of these interactions structured different responses.

The students’ interactions manifested meaningfulness of these friendships through demonstrations of motivation to interact with each other as much as possible. Megan and Mariah described their friendship with Shaffer as “just happening” naturally over time. Mariah felt it was important that this connection was internally motivated rather than externally imposed:

Well, um, you have to want to. I mean, other people in my class have been asked to work with him [Shaffer] at other times, but you have to want to. They weren’t given any say, and then it kind of dissipates, so you have to have the desire to.

As described in the section above, the consistency with which Joshua looked for and made eye contact with Stephanie while they were together reflected the importance of their friendship to him. Beyond his excitement at seeing her, he used one of the few movements he could control (i.e., turning his head) to maximize both the quantity and quality of interactions during their time together. Similarly, Megan typically initiated conversations with Shaffer before their math class started. Whenever they did not have time for a conversation, Megan persistently tried to catch his eye to communicate nonverbally during class. She tried several times to subtly get his attention, and when she did, she smiled, waved, or motioned to meet up after class. Megan and Joshua did not need to do these things during their interactions (i.e., they were voluntarily performed or added to the interactions already occurring), but it was important—and enjoyable—to them to interact as much as possible with their friend.

“This Is One of Our Jokes”: Shared Humor

Simply put, all of the friends in this study had fun together. They smiled and laughed frequently because they engaged in verbal and physical humor based on their shared experiences over time. This shared humor predominantly took the forms of (a) friendly teasing, (b) inside jokes, and (c) playful physical interactions. The reciprocity of being shared and co-constructed, as opposed to the student without a disability making the student with disability laugh, signified the close friendships.

Friendly teasing. Shaffer often teased Megan and Mariah in friendly ways via typing on his VOCA. He typed independently at times and sometimes with physical support from his paraprofessional or from Mariah or Megan under his forearm pushing away from the device for proprioceptive feedback. Mariah described the dynamic of his friendly teasing and the communication support:

My aunt used to work with kids with autism and she’s asking me about the, you know, facilitated communication. She’s like, “Do you think it’s like a Ouija Board?” You know, like, the person that’s doing the hand is [influencing the pointing]. And I’m like, “No, Shaffer cracks jokes and, like, makes fun of me all the time! I’m not making fun of myself!”

Although Emily rarely initiated conversations with others, she too participated in friendly teasing. In one memorable example, she joined the group of dancers prior to their rehearsal (which she never did) as she and Jocelyn gently teased each other when another dancer arrived with a realistic baby doll from her health class:

Emily stood to the side of the main group, but she was closer than usual. She rocked back and forth while laughing. Jocelyn

smiled and asked, "Emily, do you like the baby?" She immediately replied, "No! It's not real." She paused, laughing, and added, "It's scary!" Jocelyn laughed and joked, "Emily, do you want to hold the baby?" She immediately replied, "No!" Emily walked closer to the group, looking at the baby the entire time. Emily joked, "Jocelyn, do you want to pet the baby?" She replied, "No way!"

Emily built on Jocelyn's teasing questions, and participated in the group dynamic more than during other observations primarily through the rapport with Jocelyn.

Inside jokes. Similar to Emily, Shaffer did not often initiate direct conversation with his friends. After the final meeting of the school diversity group, he initiated and engaged in a conversation based on a shared inside joke with Megan during which he was more animated and vocal than any other time during the study:

Megan: Bye, Shaffer. We'll go to the IMAX again soon.
 Shaffer: "IMAX. Australia, Land of Sharks."
 Megan: "Okay." She stands up to leave.
 Shaffer: "Australia. Joeys. Girl kangaroos."
 Megan turned back, smiling: "Not girls. Baby kangaroos."
 Shaffer: "Joeys. Baby kangaroos."
 Megan explained [to me]: "This is one of our jokes. When we went to the IMAX movie, we were talking about it after and he said that joeys were female kangaroos and I said, 'No, they're not. They're baby kangaroos.' And from then on, it's been one of our jokes."
 Shaffer: "Baby kangaroos in Australia."
 Megan: "What else?"
 Shaffer: "In Australia, kangaroos, koalas, and wombats."
 Megan, surprised: "Wombats? That's a new one."
 Shaffer: "Joeys. Girls."
 Megan, smiling: "Now you're just totally joking. Don't make fun of me!"

In addition, the repetition through the scripting of the joke was beneficial to Shaffer who typically typed to communicate because of difficulties with spontaneous speech. And, it allowed him to spontaneously add something he was thinking about or that was important to him with the addition of the wombats to his list of Australian marsupials.

Playful physical interactions. Despite being unable to speak and not using any form of augmentative alternative communication, Joshua interacted constantly with Stephanie whenever they were together. This typically took the form of playful physical interactions. One typical example included passing a plastic ring back and forth. Joshua held the ring out to Stephanie, dropped it, and laughed. She picked it up and suggested, "Hey, do that again and I'll try to catch it

with my foot!" Joshua tried the first 4 times, each time dropping the ring above her foot and laughing. Then she caught it on her foot on their fifth try. "Got it!" Joshua and Stephanie both laughed. Joshua stretched up in his chair, his left arm swinging in front of him as he laughed. Stephanie gave him a high five.

Another day, Stephanie sat next to Joshua and picked up a Slinky-type toy. They began to play a tug-of-war game with each other. Stephanie held it out and Joshua grabbed at it, pulling it while Stephanie held on to it so it stretched. Then, Joshua let go so it recoiled and flung back at Stephanie. She was legitimately surprised, and then started laughing. These interactions were mutually created and enjoyed by Joshua and Stephanie.

"I Love the People That Can Talk to Me": Normalized Supports

The enactments of these friendships included various supports provided by the friends without disabilities to Shaffer, Emily, and Joshua. Although this dynamic resulted in a one-way provision of assistance, it was done in a natural manner, which made it seem more reciprocal than one-sided. They were friends who, to spend time together, delivered necessary supports with a sense of comfort and confidence based on familiarity of experience. In this regard, they very much seemed like family members who had routinized necessary supports so that they were delivered quickly and unobtrusively. In doing this, they preserved focus on the social interactions taking place.

Mariah demonstrated this dynamic of enacting their friendships when she provided communication supports in the form of a one-sided conversation rather than walking in silence to the creek behind the school for a quick field trip. She smiled and said, "Hi, Shaffer. Are you psyched to go on the field trip?" He repeated, "Go on the field trip." Mariah said, "Yeah, I am, too." A few seconds passed and then she asked, "What are you going to do at the creek?" Shaffer did not respond. They continued walking, and then Mariah said, "I hope the water's not too cold." Shaffer walked quietly. A few seconds passed, and Mariah stated casually, "It's pretty nice out." Recognizing that he could not type while walking, Shaffer had suggested such a strategy as a way to interact with friends and peers in the crowded high school hallways. They agreed to engage in what seems like and is called a one-sided conversation to enact their mutually beneficial and thus two-sided relationship. As a related component of communication in his friendships, Shaffer stressed that his friends should focus on him, not the adults who support him:

I love the people that can talk to me and not to my facilitators. Only that is the basis that is so critically interesting to me is the way that goes to my heart of the ease of the communication.

This dynamic of focusing on him, even if through a one-sided conversation, was an important practical component of their enactment of friendship. Moreover, through this unique interaction, they engaged in shared meaning making to reframe a seemingly one-sided interaction to be reciprocal within their context and enactment of friendship.

Jocelyn and Stephanie consistently and casually delivered various supports to Emily and Joshua, respectively. Jocelyn often provided short, quiet verbal prompts to Emily or rephrased others' questions so that Emily would respond to them. She was aware of the conversational dynamics such that when someone else was speaking with Emily, she did not ever answer for her, and she remained in the background with quick and quiet prompts so she would not disrupt or interfere with that conversation. Similarly, Stephanie quickly repositioned Joshua's wheelchair and subtly wiped his mouth when necessary. She provided these supports in such a way that they were barely noticeable, let alone disruptive. If she was speaking with Joshua herself, she would continue speaking with him. If someone else was, she was careful not to interrupt them.

"Because I Liked You": Mutual Benefits

Transitioning to the second research question about how the participants perceived their friendships, the first theme was identification of mutual benefits from these friendships. The participants articulated why they liked each other in specific and equitable ways. For example, Mariah and Megan described why they liked Shaffer:

Mariah: "Shaffer never puts himself first. He never, like, thinks of him, like, bettering his situation before, like, others."

Megan: "Yeah. And then he, he's, like, really good at speaking, at words, putting them together, he's really good at that. He's really funny, which is my favorite part of—When I look for a friend I look for someone I can just laugh with. It's not always serious, but I know I can fall back on it if I need to, and he's fun."

These students got to know each other in natural settings and came to realize that they liked each other and enjoyed their time together for specific reasons.

Shaffer's definition of friendship reframed his autism not as deficit or disability but as one of many characteristics among the friends, and one he felt should not incite pity or sadness:

Friendship is being given an opportunity to give the full exchange of both joy and sadness. You must accept my autism as I accept any of your differences. I don't want the association of feeling pity for my life, as I see it as being both full and seemingly lovely, but with challenges and difficulties I see

others struggling with. Kindly give thought to feel the emotion of belonging to the hope and the joy.

His friends understood that even though he did not always respond quickly or did not seem as if he was listening to them, he was taking everything in, wanting to interact, and ready to converse if given the opportunity, time, and support to access his VOCA.

While discussing how they came to be partners, Emily and Jocelyn described—and demonstrated—the benefits of their mutual liking of the other. Specifically, they each engaged in a supportive ease of interaction with the other. I had asked Emily why she picked Jocelyn for a partner:

Emily, looking down and wringing her hands for 10 s before responding in a quiet voice: "I don't know."

Jocelyn: "Why'd you pick me, Emily?"

Emily looked up as soon as she heard Jocelyn's voice, smiled, and responded immediately following her question: "Because I liked you."

Jocelyn: "And I liked you."

Beyond the content of this excerpt, the immediate and recognizable difference in Emily's facial expression, physical posture, and verbal facility whenever Jocelyn addressed her as compared with someone else signified the strength of their connection. In reframing my question to Emily, she demonstrated the supportive verbal prompts she typically engaged in. Both of these contributed to the ease of interaction they shared.

Later in the same discussion, Jocelyn described specific benefits of their relationship: "She gives me happiness. She really does. Coming here really makes me happy because all she does is smile. She makes me very happy . . . I've learned to be, uh, patient, and I'm extremely happy." The mention of patience reflects a period of time prior to the study, according to the Rainbow Troupe's director, during which Emily engaged in verbally and physically aggressive behaviors, often directed at Jocelyn. They worked through these difficult moments together, learning how to act as partners and getting to know each other as friends in the process.

Differing Conceptions of Friendship

The participants self-identified as friends and described receiving mutual benefits from the friendships. Yet their perceptions of their friendships differed in fundamental ways, reflecting context-specific patterns of interactions and situated understanding of each other and their relationships. Differences were related to the comparison of these friendships by the students without disabilities with their other friendships, as well as the recognition of the work it took to be friends.

"I'm not so nice or special for being a friend." Sometimes this strong connection to someone with a severe disability was difficult for others to perceive or understand. Stephanie received local media attention and some school-wide acclaim for her friendship with Joshua. Although she appreciated this recognition, it also bothered her:

I'm not so nice or special for being a friend. Just like when I got the award for volunteering, I appreciated it but still it wasn't like I considered myself a volunteer, and I still don't. People tell me I should work at Elm Street [Nursing Home] because I'm there so much, but for me, I don't think I could do that at this point. For me it's just like hanging at a friend's house all the time. No one tells someone to get a job at a friend's house.

Stephanie felt conflicted about this recognition because it defined her acts as "special," effectively ignoring the typicality of the strong connection of friendship she shared with a classmate who happened to need pervasive supports. Joshua's visible disability and support needs changed the frame of reference for others but not for Stephanie:

People will say, "Oh, you're so nice," which I hate because I'm not doing this to be nice. I do it because we are friends and I want to be here. At lunch people sometimes say, "Why is he at our table?" and stuff like that, but not too much. Sometimes people assume that it is something I have to do for credit or for a class or something rather than what I want to do. It's like he's any other friend. He's just as important to me. Some people can't understand that, but that's not my fault. I treat him like he's my friend because he is my friend.

Stephanie viewed Joshua as similar to her other friends, and took offense to the assumption by others that she was only spending time with him due to an obligation for credit or for a class.

"It's all the same." Similar to Stephanie, Jocelyn described her friendship with Emily as akin to those with the other dancers in Rainbow Troupe and classmates outside of the group:

I think of them the same. It's all the same. (Short pause.) Like, Emily, I've been friends with her for seven years. (Short pause.) Like, I see her out, but I can never, like, make a set time on Friday night to go with her because we're both busy and the distance is a factor. When there's a dance or something with ARC or with her other group that she's in now, I'll go to that, and I'll see her there.

Unlike Stephanie, she seemed unsure when she responded, and her actions did not back up her statement. While Stephanie spent time with Joshua on par with the time she spent with her other friends and regularly spent time with Joshua and other friends together, Jocelyn and

Emily did not spend time together outside of Rainbow Troupe functions during the study. During follow-up questions and member checks, she repeated the perception of her friendships as all being the same though it was clear that despite sharing a long-term connection with Emily she did not share with the other dancers in Rainbow Troupe, she did not enact her friendship with Emily as she did with her other friends who did not have disabilities. This dynamic may simply reflect the phenomenon of different types of friendships, including some developed and enacted in specific contexts such as the dance class. It also seemed as if Jocelyn was still making sense of their relationship.

"It says a lot that we're all friends because it takes work." After what his special education case manager described as years of surface level social interactions with his classmates and peers, Shaffer relished his friendships with Megan and Mariah during their senior year: "The year of the friends was so awesome." Megan and Mariah similarly felt strongly about Shaffer, especially in comparison with their other friends:

Mariah: Well, Shaffer will be like a true friend. In a lot of ways, Shaffer's probably a better friend than some of them. He's probably the most loyal person.

Megan: It says a lot that we're all friends because it takes work. It doesn't take work to be friends with our other friends because you can just go up and talk to them and be like, "Let's go do this. Let's go do that." But, to be friends with someone that can't communicate with you takes work, and it shows that he really wants to be your friend, too, because he has to put effort into communicating with you, so, like, other people, they don't have to try to communicate with you, you know. So, I think it says a lot, but it's definitely harder.

Megan and Mariah recognized and articulated something Stephanie and Jocelyn did not, namely, that the element of work contributed to not only the strong connection but also to a different dynamic. Joshua and especially Stephanie contributed work in the enactment of their friendship; however, Stephanie held a strong advocacy stance, which contributed to her perception of the friendship as similar to those with her typically developing peers. Jocelyn and Emily interacted without extra effort in the structure of the Rainbow Troupe, though they did not create opportunities to interact outside of it. Shaffer, Megan, and Mariah interacted in and out of school, navigating verbal and typed communication and busy schedules (e.g., Shaffer's therapies; Megan and Mariah's lacrosse practices and games). These differing conceptions of friendship, including the notion of work, manifested in their different enactments of friendship.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine existing friendships between secondary school-aged individuals with and without ASD or IDD to learn how they experienced and made meaning of their friendships. The findings address how the students enacted and perceived their friendships, revealing relevant themes and descriptors that may serve as key considerations for friendships between secondary students with and without ASD or IDD. These findings contribute to and extend the literature by providing insight about the dynamics of these relationships and a possible framework to help individuals, educators, families, and researchers conceptualize friendships as they work toward supporting students with and without disabilities to develop such relationships.

First, these friendships were reciprocal, meaningful, and fun. This finding confirms prior findings of reciprocity and meaningfulness as core components of friendship for students without disabilities (e.g., Vaquera & Kao, 2008) and students with ASD or IDD (e.g., Day & Harry, 1999). Importantly, it also suggests a broader notion of reciprocity is required for friendships between students with and without ASD or IDD. In this study, reciprocity was supported by the students articulating specific reasons they liked their friends and specific benefits they each received from the friendship. In this regard, reciprocity was more broadly conceptualized as mutual benefit or mutual liking rather than as an equal exchange or interchange. Because social meaning is rooted in social interaction according to the symbolic interactionist perspective, how actions are reciprocated depends on interpretation and local meaning, not objective features (Keysar, Converse, Wang, & Epley, 2008). Within the context of these relationships built on mutual benefit and/or mutual liking, one-sided help occurred and actions were reciprocated equally but differently. Thus, the enactments of these friendships seem to share similarities to the enactments of adult sibling relationships in which reciprocity exists through shared activities and experiences in those roles (as friend or sibling), though it looks different based on what individuals can do and the social context of their relationship (Kramer, Hall, & Heller, 2013). Within these enactments of friendship, there was “a belief in the reciprocity of the relationship” (Kliewer, 1998, p. 86) that allowed for recognition of mutuality.

Meaningfulness was evidenced by the excitement the participants showed when they were together and the many little ways they tried to maximize interactions. Thus, meaningfulness was found in the emotional response and/or internal motivation to consistently spend time together. This finding also adds the descriptor of having fun to definitions of friendship for students with ASD and IDD. The element of fun was clearly present through their varied types of shared humor. The shared humor was notable for being co-constructed and mutually enjoyed by each friend. In

addition, the participants found ways to engage in humor (i.e., VOCA use, physical play) despite a range of communication skills. This dynamic required that the friends without disabilities presumed the competence of their friends with ASD or IDD rather than assuming that their communication differences meant that they did not have anything to say—or to joke about (Biklen, 2005).

Second, the friendships had developed through multiple opportunities to interact over time. Although this occurred prior to the current study, the enactments of their friendships that were presently examined showed the benefits of such a duration of shared experiences. The students in this study shared inside jokes with each other. The students without disabilities provided necessary supports to their friends with an ease and confidence typically demonstrated by family members. These behaviors required routinization through shared experiences over time to become part of their enactments of friendship. Inclusive classrooms alone may not lead to such experiences. Thus, these findings support prior findings for educators focusing on friendship to facilitate reciprocal and meaningful interactions in natural, inclusive settings (Carter et al., 2013; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Evans & Meyer, 2001; Kalymon et al., 2010).

In addition, the type of settings in which the students interacted was a key consideration. Emily and Jocelyn benefited from the consistency and structure of the after-school dance program. The other participants found time to interact when they could in a more spontaneous manner. They also interacted across multiple settings both in and out of school. Through this lens, Emily and Jocelyn’s friendship may have been limited due to being enacted in only one setting, though that type of context-specific relationship is surely common.

Third, the friends without disabilities felt they were not special. Borrowing the phrase from Stephanie, who conveyed this the most intensely through her person-first and inclusive advocacy stance, the students without disabilities were sensitive to assumptions that they spent time with their friends for any reason other than their choice and enjoyment. However, the friends without disabilities shared some similarities that may be instructive in supporting similar friendships. All four of them displayed a maturity, which manifested (both to me during observations and to their teachers who talked about it during interviews with me) as independence from high school cliques. In addition, Stephanie and Jocelyn learned about disability and inclusion in their families from mothers who worked in the field. Perhaps this figured into the development of Stephanie’s comfort with Joshua’s nonverbal communication and Jocelyn’s recognition of patience as a benefit of her friendship with Emily.

Fourth, the friendships looked different. When they spoke about their friendships, Stephanie stressed that she was not special in any way for being friends with Joshua.

Both she and Jocelyn perceived their respective friendships with Joshua and Emily as similar to those with other friends. Alternately, Megan and Mariah viewed Shaffer as a better friend compared with their other classmates. Because it took work to be friends (Rossetti, 2011), they perceived the friendship as more genuine, but not as easily enacted, than others. This finding is similar to the results of a study conducted by Kalymon et al. (2010), which found that typically developing, middle school boys felt added responsibility in relationships with peers with severe disabilities due to possible caregiving and safety needs, as well as communication differences. Students with and without disabilities would benefit from discussions with educators and/or their families about how to provide needed supports and how to balance this dynamic with the social part.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

Although the findings contribute to our understanding of students' perceptions and enactments of friendship in secondary school settings, it is important to note several limitations that should be addressed by future research. First, this study included two to three student participants in each of the three settings. Additional student perspectives in other inclusive settings would contribute to a greater understanding of friendships between students with and without ASD or IDD. Another limitation in the study was the lack of comparison with peers without disabilities at the same grade levels. While some of the participants in this study described similarities and differences to their other friendships, comparison with classmates' friendships would have allowed for further contextualization and understanding of these relationships. Third, the findings may reflect characteristics unique to these settings. Although the challenge of friendship is universal, researchers should examine perceptions and enactments of friendship in other inclusive classrooms, highlighting potential indicators that may be of use in supporting others. Fourth, the analysis, while guided by symbolic interactionism, tended to focus on the perceptions and meaning of individual interactions more so than the intersection of individual and contextual factors. Future research should investigate social interactions and activities in specific social contexts. Finally, future research is needed to understand how these authentic relationships are formed. The participants in this study had already developed friendships with each other, allowing for the focus on how they enacted and perceived their close relationships. These descriptors of friendship may provide a framework for considering and conceptualizing such relationships. Other studies should focus on the contexts and supports that facilitate the development of friendships between students with and without disabilities.

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