Friendships in Dyadic relationships between Young Adults with Developmental Disabilities and Nondisabled Peers-- Dialogues on Friendship: Making a Difference

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Friendship is a treasured aspect of our experience of being human. Friendship for anyone is a place of refuge and understanding. It is a place where we go when we require time away from the onslaught of daily life and the sufferings that we all endure from time to time that need to be sorted out and discussed. In that place of being, or through that portal, much laughter, joy and strength gather.

A friend is all that and much more, which is in no way easily described or defined. It is altogether human to bond with someone, to want to share with another and to be together with that person in ongoing active and wonderful encounters. When one considers what life would be without friendship it would be something we could not endure” Sutherland (2010).

As young people who have developmental disabilities are being included within regular classes in schools throughout Canada and in many other countries, a vitally important aspect of their inclusion is friendship with others. Inclusive education is a direct way to develop friendships between persons who have developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers. Flavey, Forest, Pearpoint, and Rosenberg (2002) noted: one of the key characteristics of building connections and friendships is being in close proximity to people and having frequent opportunities to interact with each other (Asher, Odem & Gottman, 1977; Hartup, 1975; Howes; 1983; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975)...(p.29).

Furthermore, when one examines the evidence it becomes clear that we are the recipients of many benefits in our relations with others, and perhaps friendships are all the more pertinent to young people who have disabilities. Certainly, “the evidence suggests that friends are developmental advantages in
socioemotional development” (Hartup, 1992, p.126). Severity of disability and developmental disability in general, does not mean that people do not have the need for relationships, or cannot have close friendships with peers without disabilities. “Unfortunately, students with severe disabilities often have fewer opportunities to develop friendships and less social savvy than do the typical adolescent” (Hendrickson J. M., Shokoohi-Yekta, M., Hamre-Nietupski, S., & Gable, R. A., 1996, p. 26). Additionally, educators may perceive someone who has a developmental disability as unable to be in, and have a friendship, with a peer without a disability. Lutfiyya, (1991) however, found an exchange and equality between people who were happy to be in relationships. She reported that it was once held that the people most likely to be friends with individuals with learning difficulties are others with the same impairments. Whether this is consciously stated or not, many researchers believe it to be true, and then examine only this type of relationship. (p. 2)

Sutherland (2010) also found the friendships in dyads between a young adult with a developmental disability and nondisabled peer to be a rich and beneficial experience of friendship for the young people involved in them. Taylor and Bogdan (1989) found that there were many examples of persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities in friendships with one another. They also stated that the relationships that they studied between persons with mental challenges and nondisabled peers were strong, real, and endured. In their qualitative research, they described in depth the people who are involved in the relationships, and the nature of the relationships. Furthermore, it should be noted that Taylor and Bogdan’s findings revealed that the relationships are not one sided, but in fact, are very much a mutual and rewarding relationship for everyone involved. An important point is that researchers continue to examine the nature and experience of friendships that students with developmental disabilities have with other students without disabilities in inclusive schools and classrooms.

There are many and varied strategies available to create friendships and bonds amongst students. However, isolation may continue to be a factor in the lives of students with developmental disabilities and may also occur in inclusive situations if the development of friendships with nondisabled peers is not supported. Studies that report difficulties in friendships between the two groups or the inability to form friendships,
As an educator I have the opportunity to ask myself: “What can I do today to help this young person to form a friendship with another person?” We may also develop friendships, through collaborative learning strategies, peer supports and creating positive climates of belonging in classrooms. Belonging means that the student is in the classroom, and being treated like an equal member of the class. It also means that the student is a valued person, and will contribute to the community of learners. What we do as educators has a serious impact on the perception and the acceptance of young people who have developmental disabilities in the regular classroom. This impact, if it is nonexclusive in nature, may inhibit the choice the nondisabled peer has to develop a friendship with the fellow student who has a developmental disability. The positive inclusion of all students, and the facilitation of friendship whenever necessary, may make a tremendous difference in the life of a young person.

What does it mean to facilitate a friendship? Should friendships develop naturally between two people? How do we encourage the young person who is challenged reach out to others? Do we wait for the nondisabled peer to approach then hope that it happens and evolves on its own? I think it depends on the relationship and the ability of the two people involved, and requires a balanced and conscientious effort on the part of the educator, of when to become involved. Natural friendships may be the ideal, but we also may need to facilitate when it is required.

The people who facilitate relationships between students with developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers, need to let the students within the relationship determine its course, in a way that is most natural to them, whenever possible. As in any friendship, there is no guarantee which of our
friendships will develop, and to what extent they will develop. Within schools, there are many activities, and students may find common interests that they have together, in and out of the community of the school. From a solid starting point and given the right support, students will figure it out for themselves, and develop their friendship with their peer.

Like any relationship, there are many ways to begin the friendships. Friendships begin through our proximal interactions, meeting someone in our relationships with others, social media, school clubs, and so on. How do persons with disabilities meet other people? They may require our help to get started. They may not. There is no one way for us to meet one another, and there is no one way to support new friendships. Inclusive education provides a foundation for students who have developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers to meet one another.

An example of a friendship that began in a regular high school inclusive environment that began as an acquaintance friendship, and that can be viewed on podcast is “Alex and Jollean,” Sutherland (2003). As a postsecondary community advocate and facilitator at the postsecondary university level, Suzanne Frank said:

When I think of Alex and Jollean they started in very much an acquaintance type relationship. What it was from there was supporting Jollean and Alex to see the spark in each other. That the relationship that they had involved a lot of things they had in common, and what was nice about their relationship was it spilled out of school hours.

There are many people who can offer advice and provide hands on assistance within schools from community and provincial associations. As educators are busy, and the demands that we have will continue to grow, that support can be welcome. Also, the collaborative team that is usually in place for the student who has a developmental disability can be a supportive and knowledgeable resource. As educators, we also work in collaboration with other special and regular educators to develop the necessary strategies and support systems. Parents and school leadership, as part of the team, play a role in the development of friendships within schools and outside of schools at any level of schooling, and also within postsecondary environments.
“Aimee and Shani,” Sutherland (2010) found their relationship required facilitation when it reached a point where it seemed that it could not develop further. Aimee’s mother Brenda, worked hard to support the young women and bring the two together into a more positive relationship which began in a support relationship and then blossomed into a friendship. For Brenda, she felt that she had to make a paradigm shift, from one of thinking about goals that the two young women could achieve together, to letting the relationship be, and grow on its own without any restriction. Due to this process of stepping in when necessary, and then getting out of the way, it became clear that both Aimee and Shani developed their relationship into one that they defined as a friendship.

Shani: Like any friendship, I think like a maturing and just a gaining of greater strength through experience and getting to know each other and being able to talk with each other. When I first started, Aimee wasn’t much for chatting with me or talking to me very much at all, so being able to communicate more and being able to find out things that she needed and how I understand her, and sometimes I just know what she wants or what she is thinking. Like any best friend that I have had in the past or any good friend, the more you are around someone, the more you get to truly know them.

S: A good friend helps you feel how in your life, Aimee?
A: Talk.
S: Someone you can talk with?
A: Yes.
S: And if you are feeling a sad day, what do you think a good friend would do?
A: Cheer me up.
S: Cheer you up. And if your friend was feeling sad, what would you do as a friend?
A: Hug.
S: Give them a hug. Help them feel glad?
A: Yeah.
S: A good friend is definitely someone you can talk to, that you can cheer up, and they can cheer you up too.

It is within our capacity to build relationships, to connect others. Usually, if there is a will, we will find ways to overcome existing challenges, whatever they may be. The result for two people may be friendship. The result for us, if we require
one, is the knowledge that we made a difference in the life of another person.
Friendship is an important aspect of any students’ life. To help wherever possible and necessary is very important.

Jollean: “I have made a difference, he’s made a difference in my life.” I think that Alex has strengthened my personality has made me a better person, I have gained more patience, I have more confidence in myself, and I believe that Alex has taught me more than I have taught him. He is one of my best friends, Alex is my best friend.”

Alex: “She is so nice and pretty and very kind, I like being in a friendship with Jollean, and I want to have a good time, because, I have a lot of experience with her, having a great talk, a great laugh, and I am so grateful about with Jo and I am flattered. I think our friendship is very important I never been so happy with Jo.”

Suzanne: “What has been really good for me to see is how this has all unfolded. Alex and Jollean are friends, and I think that says it all Sutherland (2003).
References


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