Friendship Matters: Fostering Social Relationships in Secondary Schools

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Decades of research exploring the social lives of youth can be summarized fairly succinctly— friendships matter.

Peer relationships play an important role in adolescent development and can contribute to a full and rewarding life. Indeed, it is through friendships that youth learn about peer norms, values, and accepted social behaviors. As they spend time together in and outside of the classroom, youth exchange important emotional, social, and practical supports that help them navigate the challenges of adolescence a bit more easily. And friendships can provide a rich and meaningful context for youth to develop self-determination, social, leisure, academic and other valuable life skills (Brown & Klute, 2003; Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Most of all, friendships bring enjoyment to life. It is not surprising, therefore, that spending time with friends is among the first answers youth give when asked about what they look forward to most about school. Friendships really do matter.

It's All About Opportunities

Recognition of the numerous benefits associated with fostering interactions among youth with and without disabilities are implicit in many of the legislative and policy initiatives driving special education services. Yet, despite the attention given to promoting social relationships within discussions about the benefits of inclusive education, evidenced in students' Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), and voiced by educators and paraprofessionals, much of what takes place in many middle and high schools seems to run counter to promoting these important social outcomes. The limited general education curriculum experiences schools provide to students with significant disabilities, the restrictive classroom contexts in which these students spend their days, the narrow range of approaches teachers use to deliver instruction, the extensive reliance on individually assigned paraprofessionals to provide direct support, and the limited extent to which

extracurricular activities and other after-school events are considered by planning teams—all contribute to limited opportunities for youth with significant disabilities to develop relationships with their classmates. And the impact on the well-being of youth can be substantial. According to parents who were interviewed as part of the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2, only 22.4% of high school students with intellectual disabilities were reported to frequently visit with friends outside of school, 41.5% rarely or never received telephone calls from friends, and almost one-quarter have not been invited to other youths' social activities during the past year (Cadwallader & Wagner, 2003). These disappointing outcomes are not inherent to having a significant disability, but rather reflect the diminished opportunities and supports schools typically provide for all youth to get to know one another, experience a sense of belonging, and contribute to their school community.

Exploring Important Elements

Friendships do not have to be elusive for youth with significant disabilities. An array of evidence-based strategies offer insight into practical steps schools can take to foster meaningful peer relationships among all youth (see Carter & Hughes, 2005; Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Siperstein, Norins, & Mohler, 2007). And high school redesign efforts are emphasizing that fostering relationships can enhance, rather than detract from, collateral efforts to strengthen the rigor and relevance of students' educational experiences. Our own research has been focusing on identifying important elements that (a) contribute to the development of meaningful relationships among youth with and without significant disabilities and (b) promote more natural strategies for supporting youth to participate fully in school and community life. In the remainder of this article, we discuss some of what we and others have been learning about elements that are likely to foster the development of friendships and other reciprocal relationships within high schools. Over the past year, we have worked with eight high schools as part of the Natural Supports Project. These high schools shared a common goal of increasing the engagement of youth with significant disabilities in all aspects of school life. Although each school held fairly different ideas about how they would move toward this goal, all launched their efforts by gathering a core team of youth with and without disabilities, teachers, and/or administrators who committed to work as a team throughout the school year. Through our conversations and work with these teams, we have identified five important elements schools should

consider when fostering friendships. These include (a) reflecting on existing opportunities and current practices; (b) designing shared activities, (c) promoting valued roles, (d) equipping youth, and (e) offering "just enough" support.

Reflecting on Existing Opportunities and Current Practices

In many high schools, opportunities for students with and without significant disabilities to interact with one another are uneven at best or altogether unavailable at worst (Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, in press; Williamson, McLeskey, Hoppey, & Rentz, 2006). And regular interactions are often the foundation for emerging friendships. Careful reflection on the current opportunities youth have to spend time with and learn alongside their peers—as well as the instructional and support models that hinder or enhance those opportunities—is the first element in fostering relationships among youth with and without disabilities. Rich interaction opportunities can often exist right alongside segregated activities even within the same school. Therefore, it is important to take a very targeted look at both where and when a school is doing well at fostering interaction opportunities, as well as where that school is struggling. This ongoing reflection process helps teams decide how and where to start, as well as to con-tinuously refine and strengthen their efforts along the way. Although a variety of structured reflection tools are available (e.g., Cushing, Carter, Clark, Wallis, & Kennedy, in press; Janney & Snell, 2006), teams began a self-assessment process by simply listing all the environments where students typically gather in their school and then giving a "thumbs up" or "thumbs down" to whether each environment includes students with and without disabilities in the same space, at the same time and doing the same thing. With the input of youth, educators and admin-istrators who might have described their schools as "inclusive," realized that even when students with and without disabilities had lunch at the same time and in the same room, students with significant disabilities rarely ate at the same tables as their peers. Likewise, most teams realized that although students with disabilities were enrolled in elective and related arts courses, their absence in core academic classes and extracurricular activities was striking. This reflection process helped teams prioritize environments around which to start a project that would intentionally connect students with and without significant disabilities. For example, several schools established clubs or informal networks that met over lunch each week or after school, while others focused on creating inclusive extracurricular activities. In another school, a service-learning club was created for the dual purpose of engaging all students with and without disabilities more fully in after-school activities and making volunteer contributions in the community. This particular group undertakes a self-reflection process after each weekly meeting to discuss whether all students were participating in meaningful ways together and to brainstorm ideas for improving each club members' engagement and contributions in the future.

Designing Shared Activities

Despite technological "advances" (e.g., text-messaging, social networking websites, video chat), real relationships still emerge best when youth share the same places at the same time while doing the same activities. A second element in relationship building involves creating regular opportunities for youth with and without significant disabilities to participate together in shared activities. Youth have stressed that getting to know each other takes time and activities should happen at least once a week (and preferably much more often). Inclusion in general education classes is one obvious context for offering shared learning and social activities. Yet, inclusion still remains especially limited at the secondary level—particularly within core academic and advanced courses—and the extensive reliance on individually assigned paraprofessionals further stifles the opportunities youth have to learn alongside and interact with each another (Carter, Sisco, Melekoglu, & Kurkowski, in press; Shukla et al, 1999). Youth also say that the tradi-tional "awareness day" or occasional outing provides insufficient time and opportunities for students to genuinely get to know each other. Likewise, the activities need to be fun for everyone to both draw in new students and keep them engaged. One school created an environ-mental club to develop a nearby piece of land into a nature park. Students with significant disabilities worked together with an advanced science class to create a landscape design, buy supplies, build trails and benches, and lead guided tours of interested students and community members through the new park. The students also bought equipment to go snowshoeing in winter—a novel experience few students had ever done before. Another group of youth organized high interest, off-campus field trips, such as a boating and fishing day and a trip to a planetarium, in addition to weekly gatherings over lunch to socialize and plan upcoming activities. By sharing frequent, high-interest activities, youth say they learn from each other and these interactions spill over into other parts of the school day.

Promoting Valued Roles

The third element necessary to fostering meaningful relationships among students with and without disabilities involves promoting valued roles for all students (Wolfensberger, 2007). In too many initiatives aimed at connecting youth, students with disabilities are perceived as the "recipients" and students without disabilities are considered "helpers" or "providers." When activities are established that circumvent these stereotypical roles and instead focus on ensuring everyone has a chance to demonstrate and become known by their strengths, talents, and contributions, true reciprocal relationships are more likely to develop. For example, when youth at one school decided to try wheelchair soccer during an activity night, the students with physical disabilities coached their peers on how to navigate the court most effectively. When the group learned that one of their team members who used a wheelchair was interested in photography, they connected a switch to a tray-mounted digital camera and she documented all their activities as the official club photographer. Likewise, one of the schools intentionally rotates responsibility for facilitating club meetings among all members. Every student—with and without significant disabilities—is given opportunities to assume leadership roles in running the group. At the school that created the nature park, a student with disabilities led the snowshoe tours through the park. For some of the students and community members who took the tour, seeing a student with a significant disability in a leadership role had a profound impact. Determining which roles really are most "valued," of course, is usually best done by youth themselves. However, there are some questions educators can ask when reflecting on whether the interactions they are observing reflect valued roles for all:

- Would someone else need to do the task if a student with a disability was not doing it?

- Would the tasks done by youth with disabilities be considered "cool and desirable" by their peers?

- Are youth with disabilities contributing in ways that they choose for themselves?

- Are youth with disabilities contributing in different roles over time (versus assuming static roles)?

- Does everyone have the opportunity to both give and receive support?

Equipping Students and Others

Shared activities and valued roles provide a foundation for the emergence of friendships, but youth often benefit from additional guidance and information on how to interact with and support one another most effectively (Copeland et al., 2004). A fourth element in fostering friendships among students with and without significant disabilities involves equipping students and others with relevant information, ideas, and strategies (see Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, in press). Sometimes, this information is very targeted, focusing on helping peers learn about a student's interests and talents or understand how the student communicates best, participates in alternative ways, or benefits from specific kinds of support. Other times, school teams undertook broader strategies to raise awareness of how students can support each other. For example, some schools held an assembly in which a panel of young adult leaders with disabilities shared their own experiences in high school. These self-advocates discussed the supports they found helpful during high school, as well as things that were not helpful and supports they wish had been in place. In other schools, students without disabilities said it was helpful to get basic information about the types of supports a student might need. For example, if a student with significant disabilities spent the lunch hour with friends in the school courtyard, those friends found it helpful to know the student's next class so they could make sure she arrived there on time. Generally, the school teams involved in the Natural Supports Project followed a process of providing some general up-front information about beneficial supports to other peers, followed by some adult facilitation. As students got to know each other better and took over group activities, the involvement of adults faded.

Offering "Just Enough" Support

The final element in building meaningful relationships involves offering just enough support. Both youth and educators involved talked about the various ways adults can hinder—usually unintentionally—the development of friendships between students with and without disabilities (Giangreco, Yuan, McKenzie, Cameron, & Fialka 2004). For example, youth shared that they were reluctant to approach a student they did not know who was always accompanied by a paraprofessional. They worried they would say something wrong or sensed that the adult was discouraging interaction. One youth told of trying to meet with her friends who had significant disabilities in the art room. When she asked her friends why they did not show up, they indicated that the paraprofessionals assigned to "support" them during lunch did not believe that someone

was meeting them. Schools must explore creative ways to simultaneously ensure safety for students with disabilities while allowing students sufficient freedom from adult supports. After all, most adolescent friendships take place outside of the close watch of adults.

One group of youth planned a welcome party for students with disabilities and their parents prior to the beginning of the school year. As one student without disabilities said, "My parents wouldn't let me go out with people they don't know. Why would parents of students with disabilities let their kids hang out with us if they don't know us?" At the welcome party, the youth asked families for ideas on what types of supports their children might need when going out socially. At one high school, peers hang out with students who have significant disabilities between classes so para-professionals are no longer needed as "escorts." Most of the schools have used creative ideas generated from youth with and without disabilities on how most effectively to support each other so that minimal adult supervision and support is needed.

However, paraprofessionals and educators can still play a vital role in fostering friendships at their schools. Adults should regularly seek out ways to encourage new relation-ships and promote collaborative interactions among students. An array of practical facilitation strategies can be used to increase the quantity and/or quality of interactions that occur among students. Example strategies include modeling ways for students to interact and work together, highlighting similarities among students, teaching valued social interaction skills, interpreting the communicative intent of challenging behaviors, redirecting questions and conversations to students, identifying and reinforcing students' strengths, and assigning responsibilities and activities that encourage interaction (Carter, Cushing, & Kennedy, in press; Causton-Theoharis & Malmgren, 2005; Ghere, York-Barr, & Sommerness, 2002).

Final Thoughts

Friendships play an important role in enhancing the quality of life of youth with and without significant disabilities. As a field, we have learned a great deal about important factors that can foster and hinder the development of friendships during adolescence. Yet, a day spent in the life of most high schools would suggest that we still have much further to go before we attain the goal of creating learning communities where all students have real opportunities to experience a sense of true belonging and enjoy meaningful relationships with their peers. Knowing the elements that create these opportunities, applying them throughout our schools and maintaining the benefits for the entire student population remains our charge. Friendships matter. Our services and supports should reflect this commitment.

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mation to share that can assist other parents in creating social networks for their children as well as to share about which professionals, organizations, and businesses have a history of working well with families. Most parents of children with disabilities tend to share similar concerns and needs for their children. In addition to networking on a local level, I advise parents to reach out to national and international organizations that advocate for persons with disabilities such as TASH, The Arc, National Down Syndrome Congress (NDSC), and National Down Syndrome Society (NDSS) to name a few. These organizations are comprised of members that can help parents to better advocate for their children and also provide training materials and opportunities in the form of seminars and conferences. The organizations also maintain lists of resources and members that may be available in your local area. I urge parents to become involved and stay active and current.

My advice to parents of young children with disabilities is to start to build relationships early and often. It is certainly a win/win for all involved. So many parents of typically developing children that Evan is around have expressed their gratitude to have an opportunity to teach their children about appreciating differences through their interaction with Evan. I advise parents to do their research, attend seminars and conferences, and connect with other parents that have gone through or are going through similar stages of development.

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