"When they don't have to sit there they don't. They'll go and sit somewhere else"

Students with disabilities talk about barriers to friendship.

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ABSTRACT
Students learn best when they feel accepted, included and have positive social relationships. Over a period of two school years, four students with disabilities told their stories of the reality of their secondary school experiences including their experiences of friendships and social relationships in their classrooms and out-of-class settings. This article presents some of the contextual factors that were identified as supporting and/or hindering positive social relationships and learning.

Unintentional and intentional barriers to positive social relationships are explored, and some implications for teachers, as they promote student learning within the classroom, are presented. Teachers are invited to listen to these stories and reflect on their pedagogy so as to learn how to create supportive learning environments where the values and principles of the New Zealand Curriculum are supported and where the key competencies of Relating to Others; Participating and Contributing; and Managing Self are developed.

Practice Paper

Keywords: *Friendships, key competencies, pedagogy, secondary schools, social relationships, students with disabilities.*

INTRODUCTION
We would all agree that friendship and positive relationships are an important part of our lives and that it is a truism that people have a basic need to be valued, liked and respected by others, and to experience warm, reciprocal relationships; our friends satisfy our need to belong, to understand who we are, and support us as we face new experiences and challenges. Because children spend a great deal of their time in school settings, the school plays a role in social learning. This is part of our responsibility as teachers to create environments where children will develop the skills that will 'enable them to live full and satisfying lives' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 8). However, there are contextual factors that create barriers for children to get to know each other, as well as "othering" students with disabilities: a practice that influences the perceptions of students without disabilities as they ask themselves, "Would this person make a good friend?"

This article explores some of the stories of four students with disabilities about their secondary school experiences, particularly their social experiences, and contextual factors that shaped these. The first section briefly explores the nature of friendships and positive social relationships in inclusive schools. Following an outline of the research project, the findings are presented using Pivik, McComas and LaFlamme's (2002) framework of four barriers to inclusive education.

So what literature can we draw on to help us here?

Friendships and positive social relationships
Adolescents with disabilities have the same desires and needs for friendship as their peers without disabilities, and secondary education can provide a context to encourage independence and develop social relationships (Thomas, Bax & Smyth, 1989). However, for students with disabilities, making friends and establishing positive relationships can be made more difficult by what may be an 'already problematic life' (Smith, 1997, p. 258). Such confounding factors may be the nature of their disability, stigmatisation, and problems with family as adolescents seek more independence. Barnes (1990) and Field, Hoffman and Posch, (1997) maintain that the inability to address these students' needs is a characteristic of non-inclusive schools and another contributing factor to poor social outcomes.

Inclusive schools
Inclusive education involves more than placing students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms; in inclusive schools working in an ecological model, students learn together in classrooms that support their diverse needs. Inclusive schools recognise that students are disabled by the environment and social practices, as well as by their bodies (Shakespeare, 2006). In a deficit and exclusive model, a lack of friends is construed as the students' fault and often withdrawal social skills programmes aim to teach the students with disabilities the social skills that are required to establish positive social relationships (Scanlon, 1996); this model does not address the social skills of the students without disabilities or other factors in the environment, for example, teacher attitudes and pedagogy, that do not support positive social relationships. There are also issues of transfer and generalisation (Nesbitt, 2005).

Inclusion, one of the principles of the New Zealand Curriculum (MOE, 2007) seems to be easier at the primary school level than the secondary perhaps because of fewer constraints, such as a grade level curriculum and the pedagogical approaches of secondary teachers (Meyer, 1996). Secondary schools have been much slower in moving towards and developing inclusive classrooms (Cole & McLeskey, 1997), and there is a perception that secondary schools, by retaining their traditional structures and practices, are slower than primary schools to change and embrace inclusive ideologies and practices (Thousand, Rosenberg, Bishop & Villa, 1997). In secondary schools, students are expected to use their skills to learn information, and because secondary teachers work with large numbers of different students each day, contact time is more limited than in the primary school context (Schumaker & Deshler, 1994). There is also pressure from the assessment system and "getting through the curriculum". Some researchers argue that in a traditional model, the concept of difference is perpetuated and the status quo is maintained in pedagogy and school structure with little innovation and change (Carrington & Elkins, 2002). Consequently, to include inclusive practices will require a critique of traditional pedagogical models (Thousand et al., 1997). Furthermore, organisational features of most secondary schools (e.g. individual timetables, changing classrooms, and multiple teachers) can hinder the development of peer relationships and thus also need critical analysis (Schnorr, 1997).

There is an extensive international literature base on students' friendships and social relationships (Meyer & Ward, 1999). Three main themes emerge: *proximity* – children make friends with those children who are near them i.e. same class, same age, same neighbourhood: *opportunity* – children need opportunities to be together and to share interests and experiences, and *facilitation* –for young children's parents to facilitate early friendships. However, once children are at school, teachers need to create an environment whereby children have opportunities to be in proximity to each other in order to learn social skills and make friends. Proximity is necessary for making new friends for friendships to develop; students need to be connected with a subgroup of peers, other than informal interactions related to class activities and routines (Schnorr, 1997). These informal interactions as part of a supportive learning environment enable students with disabilities to be noticed by their peers with positive characteristics identified, thus reducing stigma and encouraging the valuing of diversity; informal interactions can lead to positive social relationships and friendships.

Six "frames of friendship"

An important contribution to the literature on friendships and social relationships is the work of Meyer et al., (1998). From their participatory research with adolescents with disabilities, the researchers described a range of social relationships between students with and without severe disabilities. This "frames" perspective addresses the issue of viewing friendships from a model other than a traditional one. They purport that in all settings children fit into six friendship frames: Best Friends; Regular Friend; Just Another Kid; I'll Help; Inclusion Kid; and Ghost/Guest. Best Friends are the ones who share intimate thoughts and worries and are usually drawn from the group of Regular Friends. Regular Friends are the friends who socialise in and outside the class but may not share their closest secrets. Just Another Kid reflects the relationships with classmates that all the students' experience whereby students are not Regular Friends with all the students in the class but everyone is accepted as a classmate with common experiences of being in the same class. The Inclusion Kid is one who interacts with his/her teacher-aide and teacher but has little interaction with the other students. This can be created when the teacher uses language such as "the ADHD Kid" or "the ORRS Kid" and when the teacher sees the student as the responsibility of the teacher-aide. This frame may include the I'll Help frame within a charity model whereby the student with a disability is seen as always needing help; helping may be the only interaction with students without disabilities. At worst, the student with a disability is not treated as part of the class (a Ghost) or regarded as an invited Guest. This can be a reflection of exclusionary language or the student not being on the roll of the class, for example, being on the roll of an attached unit; this implies the student does not belong but is visiting. It is also evident when the curriculum and physical environment are not adapted for the student, and when the student is not included in group or class activities. These latter frames do not reflect inclusive classrooms and the principles and values of the curriculum.

The New Zealand curriculum

'Learning is inseparable from its social and cultural context. Students learn best when they feel accepted, when they enjoy positive relationships with their fellow students and teachers, and when they are able to be active, visible members of the learning community' (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 34). This statement comes from the New Zealand Curriculum in the section on Effective Pedagogy: teacher actions promote student learning, and thus recognises that teachers play a vital role in creating the environments that support learning – both academic and social. The curriculum makes explicit reference to creating supportive learning environments with specific suggestions of how this might happen in classrooms, thus promoting and facilitating students' academic and social learning such as shared activities and conversations, learning partnerships and learning communities. In order to be effective teachers supporting the curriculum's vision of confident, connected, active and

lifelong learners by developing related values and key competencies, they must recognise some of the barriers that may inhibit such learning and seek to address these in their pedagogy.

From their research, Pivik, et al., (2002) suggest some factors which create barriers that inhibit the inclusion of students with disabilities thus storying students with disabilities as The Inclusion Kid or as Ghosts or Guests (Meyer et al., 1998). They identified four categories of barriers to inclusive education in schools that affect social acceptance and subsequently positive relationships: '(a) the physical environment (e.g. narrow doorways, ramps, seating); (b) intentional attitude barriers (e.g. isolation, bullying); (c) unintentional attitudinal barriers (e.g. lack of knowledge, understanding, or awareness), and (d) physical limitations (e.g. difficulty with manual dexterity)' (Pivik, et al., p. 97). I wanted to explore these factors from the perspectives of students with disabilities to see if these barriers were apparent in their school contexts and if so, highlight the implications for teachers with suggested ways that they could create supportive and inclusive learning environments. There has been a dearth of research investigating the perspectives of students with disabilities of their experiences at secondary school. The Pivik, et al. model is useful for understanding students' experiences within a socio-cultural context.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

Narrative inquiry

I used a narrative inquiry methodology to answer my research question: "What is the nature of the social relationships and friendships of four students with disabilities in four secondary schools in New Zealand; and what factors shape these relationships?" Narrative inquiry is a research approach that enables an understanding of experience as lived and told stories. It is grounded in Dewey's (1938) understanding of education as experience and Bruner's (1985) theory of narrative cognition as a way of knowing. Listening to and including students' stories in the research text validate their experiences. Establishing a collaborative research relationship takes time and space, and involves the researcher developing skills as an active listener, thereby strengthening the students' voice.

Participants

Over a period of two school years, four students with disabilities who were verified as having high or very high needs and who received funding through the Ongoing and Reviewable Resourcing Scheme (ORRS) told their stories of the reality of their secondary school experiences: the transition to high school and their experiences of learning, friendships and social relationships in their classrooms, and out-of-class settings. The stories of their teachers, teacher-aides and principals, siblings and peers were placed alongside and analysed. The schools were all co-educational schools in the North Island of New Zealand.

Research tools

The students', siblings' and parents' stories were recorded in interviews in their homes; other interviews were conducted in the schools. I also made observations in each of the four schools and wrote field notes and a journal of the research process. Documents including Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and each school prospectus was also sourced and included in the analysis.

Ethics

The Massey University Human Ethics Committee approved the research and addressed issues of confidentiality and anonymity, social sensitivity, truthfulness and minimising of harm. In an ethic of caring I had a primary responsibility to all those who shared their stories of experience with me (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Introducing the students

Sam has cerebral palsy and uses crutches or a wheelchair to move around. He experienced a range of friendships that fitted Meyer et al.'s (1998) six frames of friendship but for Sam it was all about change - change in friendships, changing dynamics in friendships and also personal change. His stories show a strong sense of maturing, reflection and personal agency in shaping his social relationships, thus challenging social perspectives that construct students with disabilities as passive learners.

Gemma, who has congenital vision impairment, found it difficult to make friends, and her stories tell about moving from group to group seeking acceptance. Her stories tell about the dynamics of her closest group of Regular Friends and the relationships of the girls within the group. Her stories highlight how the perceptions of peers, as well as personal and contextual factors, shape social relationships.

Adam has Duchennes muscular dystrophy and his stories are about the attitudes of his peers and teachers that affected his social relationships. He told stories of bullying and being the Inclusion Kid and Ghost and Guest in his classrooms. However, a strong theme is his maturity, reflection and personal agency in coping with the bullying alongside the support of a Best Friend.

Sarah, a Māori student with spina bifida, is a strong young woman who met some confrontation with cultural and disability issues in the context of her school, and her stories tell how these influenced her identity and her friendships.

FINDINGS

All the students valued their friendships; friendships were important in their lives. Their stories highlighted and endorsed Meyer et al.'s (1998) frames of friendships and also identified a number of contextual factors in their schools that supported and/or created barriers to facilitating positive social interactions and relationships.

Contextual factors

Some contextual factors related to societal, curriculum, and pedagogical practices that created and/or supported barriers to the development of positive social relationships emerged from the stories. I concluded that these barriers, both physical and attitudinal, directly, but also indirectly, affected peers' perceptions of the students with disabilities somewhat negatively, thus reducing opportunities to get to know each other and make friends. The barriers are outlined using the Pivik et al., (2002) model. These barriers are illustrated with comments from the four students, and some teachers, in my study; I draw on these in the discussion to highlight inhibiting practices and suggest supportive pedagogical practices that link to the intentions of the New Zealand Curriculum in creating supportive positive learning environments.

(A) The physical environment

For some schools, this was the first and easiest issue to address when enrolling a student with a disability. All the schools had some ramps. One school had installed a chair lift in one Nelson block that enabled Sam to access upstairs computer rooms, however Sam felt that because he did not have a key and relied on his teacher-aide, this made him look different in front of his peers.

There were difficulties with wheelchairs in science labs with narrow spaces between the benches and students had to sit at the end of rows or in the front. This reduced opportunities for natural social interaction. Often the students in wheelchairs were situated at the front of the room and I observed Adam sitting behind the teacher as he used the whiteboard to demonstrate part of the lesson to the rest of the class. A desk was often left for the teacher-aide to sit at and even if the teacher-aide was not present, no one sat in the desk thus creating a barrier to interaction and highlighting the Inclusion Kid/Guest frame where the student with the disability is isolated and not part of the buzz of the classroom:

> If you've got a teacher-aide people tend to not sit next to you because there's got to be a desk free in case the teacher-aide wants to come and sit next to you… so they usually leave me kind of alone. (Sam)

And:

> When they don't have to sit there they don't. They'll go and sit somewhere else. (Sam)

There are implications here for teachers to consider seating arrangements that do not isolate students in wheelchairs, and to consider how using a teacher-aide can separate students from their peers and natural support. Teachers must ask: Can all students interact? (Conway, 2008). Facilitated social interaction in classrooms supports the key competency of Relating to Others and can lead to friendships on the out-of-school landscape. Isolation in the classroom supports the Ghost/Guest frame and the Inclusion Kid frame creating an "us and them" exclusionary culture.

(B) Intentional attitude barriers

One of the more obvious of these was the ongoing bullying and social isolation that Gemma, Adam and Sam experienced from peers which also affected other peers' perceptions of them:

> Kids are so mean! I got stick every day…oh third form it was sort of like a big thing like, 'Oh Gemma needs a helper lady!' (Gemma)

> Some boy tried to tip me out of my wheelchair and then he ran away laughing… (Adam)

> Yeah, I got spat at! He spat at us going down the ramp. Who wants to get a shower of spit? (Adam)

> I go past her and she says: 'Oh gross! He's following me!' (Sam)

> She told me to 'F…off!' She just stares and stares at me…and is really mean to me. (Adam)

Adam reflectively justified this bullying as a wider problem: he saw this as influenced by family attitudes:

> I just think she's got something against people in a wheelchair…maybe her parents don't like disabled people either. She's just copied them. Yes, I don't think it's her as much as she's doing what her parents do probably.

Sam experienced this in a different way:

> They don't like passing the ball to me 'cos I might drop it and quite often it's mainly the boys 'cos if we're playing a game like soccer, the girls are pretty good and will pass the ball to me but the boys are just over-competitive…and so yeah…they just don't pass the ball to me…much. They get real competitive so it's hard to join in.

In Year 9, physical education was Sam's favourite subject but isolation through competitiveness meant he 'put it down the list'.

These stories highlight issues of bullying in schools (MacArthur & Gaffney, 2001; Sullivan, 2000) and the wider societal issues of gender and competition

supported by socio-cultural hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1996; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Light & Kirk, 2000) that are discussed in more depth in Ward (2007). Key competencies of Participating and Contributing, and Relating to Others develop in a culture of belonging where it's okay to be different. The implications for teachers are to be critically observant of practices, barriers and attitudes that support stigmatised difference, and to address these with school-wide policies and practices.

(C) Unintentional attitudinal barriers

Both the students' and the teachers'/teacher-aides' stories indicated that this factor was pervasive and influenced actions and opportunities for social interaction/relationships in the classroom and school. In some instances the research process caused some teachers to reflect on their attitudes, for example, as a researcher I became a direct catalyst for two teachers to reflect on their pedagogy:

> It wasn't until I heard that you were coming that I realised when I thought about it how little interaction he has with other students and I hadn't really noticed it much because I haven't had a lot of dealings with students in wheelchairs. Yeah it wasn't something that I'd been aware that I wasn't doing much until yeah…until you were coming. (Maths teacher)

> Actually when I saw this was coming up it started me thinking about yeah, how little interaction he had. It's quite sad! (Form teacher)

Some teachers reflected that their training had not prepared them for inclusive education:

> I was trained 20 years ago and you know, not trained to be able to deal with anything different. (Maths teacher)

A principal supported this previous statement:

> I think mainstream teachers might not necessarily acknowledge that the social agenda is there. I would say that they definitely think it is *not* their role. They teach subjects, not students. We have a number of primary trained teachers and their philosophy is a little different. They're more open to modifying the curriculum so the student can take part and the primary teachers are far more open whereas the secondary trained teachers say, 'Oh but this is the course!' There's still a long way to go!

Other teachers did not speak directly to the student in a wheelchair:

> Some relieving teachers say, 'Does he do any work here?' They'll say to my teacher-aide… 'He' or 'Is it doing the work or something?' It's terrible! I'm not an "it!" (Adam)

Although Adam conceded:

> Some teachers need to get a bit more helpful. Some teachers have been surprising. They got better after they got used to me.

Another teacher regularly ignored the student placing him in the Ghost frame:

> He thinks I'm invisible half the time. The only time he talks to me…is when he notices me. Sometimes he doesn't even know I'm in his class…hands out books! Misses me! It's really annoying! It depends what mood he's in…sometimes when he's in a good mood he'll talk to me. When he's in a bad mood he doesn't even see me. (Adam)

One teaching strategy that all the students mentioned as a welcome opportunity to work with their peers and engage in work tasks as well as social interaction, was groups:

> I enjoy working in groups better. It's like you don't have to do *all* the work…it's like you *share* the work…'cos it's real frustrating when you have to do it all yourself…especially when you have to write big long answers. (Sam)

> I'm in a group yeah…which is good. At least they'll talk to me! (Adam)

However all noted that group-work was used rarely, for example:

> In maths – definitely not! In English – sometimes. (Sam)

And some teachers reflected on this too:

> We should probably have done more group work but we probably didn't because I was conscious of trying to get through the course and having to move along I guess. I did an activity one day and they had to go and search for things in groups and one girl who probably isn't all that academic said, "Oh that was heaps of fun! Why don't we do that more often?' and I thought, 'Yes, you're right! We should!' but you're always constrained by the fact that you've got to try and teach them the syllabus and get through it all. (Economics teacher)

However, another interesting comment:

> I'm primary trained so I'm used to working with groups. (Science teacher)

A notable lack of knowledge and understanding was displayed by Sarah's' teacher when she constantly mispronounced her Māori name ('She could have tried harder' – Sarah (her chosen pseudonym) and by another teacher when she wanted to play netball with her peers:

She said I couldn't play netball because I was in a wheelchair. She said it was too dangerous. I said to them, "I'm not dangerous! I've played for many years!'

Teacher-aides also frequently created barriers for the students thus influencing the perception of peers:

If they're there then the other kids still see it as, 'Oh he still needs help!' kind of thing. (Sam)

Other stories told of how teachers did not understand the role of the teacher-aide:

I support the teacher-aide! (Science teacher)

"Unintentional attitudinal barriers" is a factor that has important implications for teachers' pedagogy. Teachers must critically observe and reflect on the kinds of relationships that students have in class and address the issues of The Inclusion Kid/Ghost/Guest frames that are apparent (Meyer et al., 1998). Teachers must reflect on the language that they use – do teachers model inclusive language and acceptance of difference (Thorburn, 1997) whereby supporting the Just Another Kid frame?

Another important issue that arose in my research and which supports other research is the role and use of teacher-aides. Understanding the role of teacher-aides and how both teacher and teacher-aides can support students in classrooms whilst developing key competencies of Participating and Contributing, Managing Self, and Relating to Others is vital when creating an inclusive culture and a supportive learning environment for *all* students in the class (Giangreco, 2003; Giangreco, Edelman, Luiselli & MacFarland, 1997; Thorburn, 1997). This also supports and models the Just Another Kid frame and encourages the development of Regular Friendships.

Thirdly, both academic and social outcomes must be assessed and addressed (Alton-Lee, 2003; Brophy, 2001); facilitating shared learning through creating a learning community, and the use of structured teacher-selected groups is one effective practice that teachers could add to their pedagogical repertoire (Baloche, 1998; Brown & Thomson, 2000; MOE, 2007). There are implications for schools to plan school-wide professional development so teachers can learn inclusive practices and develop awareness of the students' perspective and examine their own attitudes and values.

(D) Physical limitations

All the students had some physical limitations: Sam with mobility and lack of dexterity in his hands; Gemma with limited vision; Adam with lack of mobility, dexterity and strength, and Sarah with lack of mobility. Although in some instances this was a barrier and some teachers' practices did not address it, other teachers did this by getting out gear if the teacher-aide was delayed or photocopying or enlarging notes; the latter of course involves forward planning! Differentiation and adapting the curriculum to meet the academic, social, and physical needs of all students is vital in Creating a Supportive Learning Environment (Janney & Snell, 2000; Udvari-Solner, 1995) where *all* students learn and the student with the disability is Just Another Kid. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) process can support this process. *Not* addressing the specific needs of the student with a disability models and supports the Ghost/Guest frame.

CONCLUSION

The students' and teachers' stories highlight a number of areas that teachers could consider if they are to support the vision, principles and values of the curriculum, and create caring supportive learning environments that value diversity and include a social agenda (Alton-Lee, 2003; Brophy, 2001; Darling-Hammond, 1997). Underpinning all these suggestions is professional development and implications for pre-service secondary teacher education. An important section of the New Zealand Curriculum is the section on effective pedagogy (MOE, 2007). I urge teachers to reflect on the pedagogical stories they live by and reflect on what may be competing (and even conflicting) stories in the new curriculum. Identify the tensions that might exist and engage in conversations and share ideas of how to address the social agenda in secondary school classrooms in order to address equity, inclusion, diversity, respect for others, human rights, and integrity. Listen to your students' stories – what can they tell you?

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