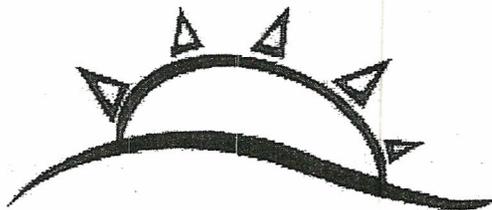




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Then Why Do So Few Kids with Disabilities
Have Real Friends?



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If Everyone Agrees This Is So Important, Then Why Do So Few Kids With Disabilities Have Real Friends?

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Advocates for inclusion (and integration and mainstreaming before that) typically cite the development of friendship as a primary benefit and outcome of inclusive education. It is generally touted that when all students are educated together natural connections between students with and without disabilities are the result. It is a rare presentation or article on inclusion that neglects to include a story of students who developed relationships as a result of attending school together.

While it is a fact that friendship is a benefit of inclusive education, there is a growing concern among families and educators that far too many students (the vast majority it seems) who are in regular education classes, still do not have the rich and fulfilling social lives they desire.

Students are more blunt — they say, “I don’t have any friends.” If we believe that friendship is an essential element of a fulfilling life, and we know that the only way students will be able to develop friends is to be educated with each other, then we must ask the question: If everyone agrees this is so important, then why do so few kids with disabilities have real friends?

This paper is an honest attempt to begin to answer this question. It does so in a way that does not blame students nor the values or principles of inclusion. Instead, it explores the systemic and attitudinal barriers that continue to exist in our society and schools — even in those schools where students with disabilities are in general education classes. It challenges readers to examine their current practices and to identify the barriers that exist in their own systems and in their own and other’s beliefs.

While the answer to the question posed requires an in-depth examination of the complex and often confounding

barriers that impact the realization of the promise of friendship, this paper will only briefly address the attitudinal barriers that continue to exist in society, and therefore schools. It will then move on to outline the impact that these endemic attitudinal barriers have on educational practices. The authors encourage others to continue this honest discussion and work to avoid and overcome these barriers in their own schools and communities.

Discrimination Disguised as Compassion: Attitudinal Barriers in Schools and Society

From Jerry Lewis to Bill Maher, society’s discrimination against people with disabilities continues. Disguised as compassion, the stigma of disability is often not even recognized as prejudice by the general public — and by school personnel. Far too often the message is, “I will help you because you are obviously, because of your disability, in need of my assistance.” People with disabilities face this prejudice on a daily basis in the form of disrespectful language, pity, inaccessibility, and low expectations. Substitute any other group of people for people with disabilities and it is blatant bigotry that would not be tolerated, yet this is somehow accepted and not even recognized. When pressed, many well-intentioned teachers still do not recognize the gifts and talents of students with disabilities, or believe that these students could have reciprocal relationship. These attitudinal barriers in society and schools significantly impact the development of real friendships between students with and without disabilities. Perhaps the greatest — and overarching — attitudinal barrier that significantly impacts students ability to develop

relationships with one another is the belief that students with disabilities are in essence deficient and require "fixing." While it is true that a student with disabilities may move, eat, talk, or learn in ways that are different from some of her classmates, society and schools often interpret that difference as deficiency and view the student as "less than" or "not quite as good as" all other students. From that vantage point, it would be almost impossible for that bias not to be communicated to classmates (whether through word, deed, or implication). As the ways in which students are regarded by their classmates are strongly influenced by how they are perceived by their teachers, the likelihood that friendships will develop decreases when students with disabilities are believed to be lacking. Similarly, too many students with disabilities are "handicapped" by other people's low expectations of their abilities and worth. Having a disability is not a tragedy nor does it inevitably mean that one will live less than a fulfilling life. There is not a person alive who is "too severe" to have friends. The presence of a disability does not handicap one's ability to have friends; rather, the negative perception of the disability by others handicaps one's ability to live the full life one wants.

In schools, these low expectations are the result of a systemic need to label students according to reified intelligence test scores and perceived academic potential (or lack thereof). Far too often teachers focus on the labels their students are given, at the cost of truly knowing them as valued individuals and understanding their abilities to learn and show what they know. Perhaps most dramatic is the label of "mental retardation." This label, based on low results on IQ tests usually due to lack of communication at the time by the testee and preconceived low expectations by the tester, has been proven wrong too many times for us to continue to use and believe in its value. Students once labeled as "profoundly mentally retarded" have gone on to tell us that they are indeed intelligent, unique, wonderful individuals with the use of various forms of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). When students are labeled "mentally retarded," it means lots for how they are educated and lots about how they are seen by others and, maybe even most unfortunate, how they see themselves. It is simply not a helpful or respectful idea.

All of these attitudinal barriers serve to make it less likely that students with disabilities will have the kind of educational experiences that lead to rich and fulfilling social lives. When they are treated as if they are broken, when they are not valued as learners, and when they are not viewed as someone who would make a great friend by their teachers, students with disabilities are often seen the same way by their classmates. It would be foolish for us to believe that these attitudes do not influence the ways in which students with disabilities are educated in general education classes.

In But Not With: Educational Practice Barriers to Friendship

Even when educated in general education classes, far too many students with disabilities still do not have the meaningful relationships they deserve. Why? When we ask this question to mixed audiences of adults, we generally hear discussion of student labels, the cruelty of other children, the lack of social skills (or language skills, or personal care skills...). In other words, we see the responsibility being placed squarely on the shoulders of children and youth.

However, when we ask this question to students, we hear a very different story. From them we hear of segregated classrooms in which they don't really know what goes on. We hear of students being "guarded" by paraprofessionals who often shut other students out. We hear of a lack of knowledge of how certain students communicate and a fear of asking the "wrong questions" to the adults around them. We hear of students leaving classrooms when the "real work" begins. We hear of students being talked to and treated "like babies" and never being asked to show what they have learned. In short, we hear of barriers that indict the very systems that have been set up to support students with disabilities.

It should come as no surprise that, given the attitudinal barriers that continue to be the norm for far too many people in and out of schools, that students with disabilities are often subjected to educational practices that serve as barriers to the development of relationships. While the authors acknowledge that too many students with disabilities are still educated in segregated classrooms and schools (which, of course, is an un-defendable barrier to both social and educational accomplishment), this paper addresses the students for whom education in general education classrooms is the standard. Unfortunately, these students also continue to suffer from educational practices that impede their ability to fully benefit from the richness of genuine relationships with their classmates. It has been said that every good idea contains the seeds of its own perversion. Inclusion is no exception. The educational practices that impede the development of friendship are not inclusion! The educational practice barriers, whether they be pull-out services, curriculum modifications made disrespectful of a student's chronological age and abilities, or the over reliance on intrusive paraprofessional supports, are educational practices that perpetuate the beliefs that students with disabilities are somehow deficient and must be provided with an educational experience different from all other classmates. These practices stem from the attitudinal barriers discussed above.

The literature is rich with information, description, and strategies to achieve best practices in quality inclusive education. To connect these best practices with the ways in which they affect friendship, a list of questions, entitled "Essential Considerations for Friendships" has been developed. Using these questions to honestly assess the educational practices in your school will assist you in the identification of barriers for specific students.

Conclusion

While it is true that there remain many barriers to friendships for students with disabilities, there is much we can do to ensure that societal prejudice will no longer be

accepted in our schools. It is up to all of us to honestly identify the barriers that exist, and work to avoid and overcome these for all students. We must believe that society and schools should forgo "tolerance" as the ultimate goal, for tolerance implies a hierarchy of value. When schools promote "tolerance," they send the message to students that "you are welcome only if you act, look, sound, think, talk, like us." This reinforces the prejudice of a social hierarchy, decreasing the likelihood that students will become friends. Instead we must work with schools and society so that we begin to "celebrate" the diversity of all of us and send the message to all students, "you are welcome exactly as you are."

Essential Considerations For Friendships

- Is the student fully included in all aspects of school, and family, and community life?
- Does the student have a way to communicate all day long?
- Are the materials, expectations, conversations, and modifications used each day age-appropriate for the student's chronological age?
- Does the student have opportunities to give as well as receive support in the classroom?
- Are supports brought into the classroom instead of the student being "pulled-out" of the classroom?
- Is people-first language used?
- Are dignity and respect high priorities for those who teach and support the student?
- Does everyone who supports the student presume his/her competence and make decisions based on the highest of expectations?
- Do educators know how to modify the regular curriculum so that the student is both an active participant in all activities *and* learning meaningful skills and knowledge?
- Does the classroom environment celebrate diversity?
- Does the class membership reflect natural proportions of students with and students without disabilities?
- Do students with disabilities use the same places, people, and things in the school building as students without disabilities?
- Does the student ride the regular school bus?
- Is friendship considered a priority goal?
- Is the student supported to participate in typical extracurricular activities of his/her choosing?
- Is there a system of communication established between home and school?
- Is someone on the team designated to coordinate intentional facilitation of social relationships?
- Are friendships "allowed" to end?