

**Friendship Experiences of Participants in a
University Based Transition Program**

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Abstract

This study examined the nature of friendships of 14 students with intellectual and developmental disabilities participating in a university-based transition program in the United States. The transition program is a bridge between high school and adulthood, designed to foster students' self-esteem and self-confidence by providing them with training and support and encouraging self-advocacy and independence skills in an age-appropriate integrated environment. Data collection procedures consisted of a focus group session and direct observations of the participants' interactions on the university campus. Results indicate that participants do indeed have friends and are eager to establish and sustain long lasting relationships. Even though participants have developed relationships that are similar in nature to those typically developed among college-age individuals, some reluctance of the participants to venture out independently and initiate connections with non-program students was observed. Further, the constructive role that parents of students in the transition program made in facilitating relationships of friendship was evident.

Introduction

The passage through adolescence into early adulthood typically involves a gradual breaking away from the family as the center of social activity and a move toward greater reliance on friendships with same age peers. School and neighborhood settings provide environments for social exploration and the gradual shift toward unsupervised social activity. For most youth, this move toward independent socialization intensifies greatly as they make the transition to college life. Historically, however, youth with intellectual and developmental disabilities who are entitled to public education services through age twenty-two, have not been afforded traditional college experiences.

Encouragingly, in recent years many states in the US have initiated programs providing opportunities for young adults with intellectual disabilities to participate in transition activities located on college campuses, affording opportunities for increased independent social functioning and the development and strengthening of peer friendships (Eskow & Fisher, 2004; Grigal, Hart & Weir, 2012; Kirkendall, Doueck & Saladino 2009; Papay & Griffin, 2013). Although characteristics of these programs vary, most are non-degree and serve students in the 18-22 year old range, offering a combination of vocational, academic and social experiences. At the site of the current study (Florida, US), students between the ages of 18-22 who have exited high school with a special diploma participate in an on-campus program which provides them with varied career experiences and the opportunity to be part of college life through academic and social activities. Knowledge about how peer friendships develop and the quality of these experiences is lacking in the professional literature. In this article we begin to explore this topic by presenting the results of a study conducted with students participating in an on-campus transition program at a large metropolitan university in the southeastern United States.

Friendship Related to Students with Disabilities

Research on friendship related to students with disabilities over the past two decades has most often focused on examining the potential or actual relationships that develop between students with disabilities and their typical peers in inclusive environments, with limited attention given to the characteristics of relationships among adolescents and young adults with disabilities. Interestingly, Turnbull, Blue-Banning and Pereira (2000) note that although they set out to study friendships between students with and without disabilities in inclusive settings, one of the unintended findings of their research was that the disability status of the friendship partners was often more important to professionals than it was to the youth themselves. In other words, the professionals focused on whether students with disabilities had friends who did not have disabilities while the students themselves did not distinguish between their friends with and without disabilities. Additionally, the researchers advised further exploration to “ensure that the adult-initiated facilitation of friendships for children with disabilities does not unintentionally stigmatize potential friends who happen to have a disability” (p.149). With this caution in mind, we purposely do not refer to the disability status of our students’ friends when discussing their relationships.

In addition to a focus on relationships between students with disabilities and their typical peers, research on friendships among adolescents and young adults with disabilities has only rarely included the perspectives of the students themselves. Matheson, Olsen and Weisner (2007) used a combination of semi-structured interviews and field observations to examine friendship characteristics of adolescents with disabilities aged 16-17 in school settings. They reported that the majority of their participants had friendships with peers and that these relationships were characterized by a focus on companionship, emphasizing the importance of having peers with similar interests and also that friendships depended on proximity. The researchers reported that this notion of “sheer proximity” (p. 9) as a characteristic of friendship is not one that fits a typical model of friendship. Interestingly, also, the authors noted the need for “guided help” (p.10) from adults in the teens’ environments to facilitate the friendships and expressed concern regarding the outcome of the friendships once the teens left the school and home contexts. Furthermore, the authors emphasized the significance of “reciprocity and mutuality” (p. 8) as core constituents of friendship. As indicated by participants’ responses, all members in a relationship should be able to reciprocate and equally contribute to the friendship.

In contrast, however, Weni-Gross and Siperstein (1997) compared the quality of friendship and social support of children with and without learning problems. Findings of the study indicated that children with learning problems were not as likely to perceive their friends as providers of support as children without learning problems. The authors also indicated that children with learning problems failed to recognize that features such as “intimacy, loyalty, self-esteem, and contact” (p.190) are key to the development of effective friendships; whereas the children in their study who were not identified as having learning problems did recognize these features as core components of friendship.

Day and Harry (1999) conducted an in-depth study of a friendship between two high school age females with disabilities, including the students’ perspectives as well as their parents. They report that the friendship was characterized by many typical aspects highlighted in the general literature on friendship such as spontaneity, mutual interests and enjoyment, age similarity and intimacy. However, they note that the students’ disabilities presented challenges to their being able to spend time together as they required “more than an average amount of adult support” (p. 229). This finding related to parent support is consistent with Matheson, Olsen and Weisner’s (2007) notion of guided help and was also reinforced by Turnbull, Blue-Banning and Pereira (2000) who reported that parents of the youth they studied saw themselves as overprotective and not able to give their children the freedom they needed to develop friendships. The researchers, however, viewed this reported “over protectiveness” as a legitimate concern for safety and a means to provide support and facilitation for the students (Turnbull, Blue-Banning & Pereira, 2000).

As discussed by McDonnell and Hardman (2010), the ability to establish and maintain friendship has been found to be key in successful adult outcomes for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. However, as noted above, information regarding how young adults with disabilities initiate and maintain friendships, as well as the characteristics of these friendships is sparse. Further, the influence of college and university settings as a factor in the provision of social opportunities for youth with disabilities as they transition to adulthood has not been examined.

Method

The purpose of the present study was to explore the friendship relationships of a group of young adults with intellectual disabilities participating in a campus based transition program. Qualitative methods were used for data collection and analysis. Data were gathered through focus groups with participants and direct observation of participant interactions with each other, with the researchers and university faculty associated with the program, and with the general university community. Prior to data collection, permission to conduct the focus group session and gather observation data was obtained from the school district and the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). Informed consent ensured the protection of the rights of the participants in the study. Participants were informed that their responses during the focus group would be anonymous. Consent was obtained from all participants and their parents.

Participants and Procedure

Participants were selected by means of a purposeful sampling procedure with the total number being 14 students who were enrolled in the on-campus program. All members of the campus-based program were invited to participate. The sample was ethnically heterogeneous with one female from a Hispanic background; two females and one male from an African American background; five females from a Caucasian background; and five males from a Caucasian background. The age range of participants was from 18 years to 22 years. Participants were identified as having mild intellectual or developmental disabilities. All students had functional communication skills.

Focus Group

A focus group session was carried out in an on-campus seminar room that was comfortable and familiar to the participants. All participants, including the moderator, were seated at a round table allowing for maximum participation and interaction. The session lasted approximately two and a half hours.

Observations

Direct observations were carried out by means of reflective notes that were taken by one of the researchers, who was also a university student, during on campus observations and interactions with participants. One of the researchers in particular, frequently ate lunch with the students and kept a reflective journal of observations. This took place over six different lunch periods.

Instruments

Focus group questions were developed (see Table 1) based on a review of the literature. The primary purpose of the focus group was to determine the nature and extent of the participants' friendships including how the participants made the friends they have and how they typically work on maintaining friendships. In addition to the focus group

data, written notes were kept consisting of thoughts and insights as the researchers observed and interacted with the participants in social settings over a period of several months.

Data Analysis

Focus group. The focus group was audio taped and transcribed for purposes of analysis. The transcription was conducted by one of the research investigators who has had previous transcribing experiences. The transcripts were analyzed by means of identifying relevant themes/codes and definitions. Inter-reliability checks were conducted on the transcripts containing responses obtained from the focus group session. Following the transcription of data, the coding process was initiated simultaneously by two of the research investigators. After the transcripts and documents were coded, both researchers were able to identify codes/themes as well as the definitions that emerged from the focus group transcript. The coded transcript was then given to a third member of the research team for an inter-reliability check. The latter researcher was provided with the transcripts, the codes, and the themes that were obtained from the initial analysis. The three researchers then got together for the purpose of discussing the emerging codes and themes. After findings and analyses were merged, a percent of agreement was calculated. Based on the discussion, all researchers worked together to refine the codes and the themes until a consensus was reached.

Observations. Reflective notes obtained from interactions with the participants were reviewed and analyzed by means of identifying relevant themes. The codes obtained from the reflective notes were compared and integrated with those extracted from the focus group transcripts. The quality of the relationship that was established between the researchers and participants was also assessed and analyzed.

Results

As depicted in Table 1, various themes emerged from the responses to the focus group questions. An elaboration on these themes and their relation to the observation data follows Table 1.

Defining Friendship

When students were asked to define what a friend is, two themes were identified: emotional support and companionship. Relating to the theme of emotional support, students defined a friend as someone with whom you can engage in conversations, and share your dreams. Some of the students also emphasized the value of a friend by likening the relationship they have with their friends to that they have with their family members. The notion of a friend as a confidant is implicit within the emotional support theme. Specifically, students explained that a friend is someone who is reliable, constantly available, and who is able to hold a secret. More importantly, a friend is someone *“that helps you out when you need it,”* and *“helps you with situations or*

Table 1.
Questions, themes and sample quotes

Question	Themes	Sample Quotes
What is a Friend?	Emotional Support	“A friend is someone you can talk to, basically like your family. He can keep a secret and connect at the same level.”
	Companionship	“A friend is someone you go to the movies with.”
When and How did you Meet your Friends?	Informal	“I basically meet friends just by talking to people. That’s how I make friends; just by introducing myself, or they come up and talk to me.”
	Formal	“Through English and Reading class in ninth grade.”
Describe a Typical Time Together	Media	“Renting movies”
	Socializing	“Hang out”
	Sports	“I play sports with [my friends].”
	Eat	“Eat”
	Dance	“I go to the dance studio with my friend.”
Would you Start a Conversation?	Extrovert	“I talk to random people all the time.”
	Introvert	“I wouldn’t talk to anybody unless they talk to me.”
How do you handle disagreements with friends?	Compromise	“Just be as reasonable about it as possible.”
	Passive	“I’m calm when it comes to disagreements.”
	Assertive	“If they’re arguing, I normally argue back a little bit, or tell them what I feel.”
How do you keep the friends you meet?	Support	“Friends are just like your family.”
	Positive and Fun Personality	“You’re always good, cool and fun.”
	Spending Time Together	“Hang out, spend time together, watch a movie.”

problems.” Receiving emotional support from their friends is necessary for the students’ acquisition of a stronger sense of well-being and belonging. Relating to the theme of companionship, students defined a friend as someone *“that goes with you places and does stuff with you,” “you go to movies with,” and “you can have fun with.”* These responses suggest that like their typical peers, these students belong to a network of people with whom they feel close and whom they perceive as important.

When and How Friends are Met

The majority of students specified that the manner in which they managed to meet their friends was formal. In other words, participants specified that *“school”* was the main setting in which they were provided opportunities to interact with their peers and form friendships. One of the students emphasized that she has known her best friend since she was in eighth grade. She went on to explain that she was able to make more friends in middle school and high school than in elementary school. However, for another student, it was difficult to make friends in middle school since she was a *“loner,”* as she described herself. She added that it was not until she was in high school that she began to form friendships; *“high school: that’s where I met most of my friends. They were mostly all girls; there were no boys. That’s where I met most of my friends: in high school.”* Two students specified that the friendships that they had formed were facilitated by their mothers. One student stated that her friend’s mother *“and my mom used to be friends when they were kids, so I know her for a long time.”* The other student’s response was: *“I met [my friend] when his mother came over to my house.”*

A few students, conversely indicated that the manner in which they were introduced to their friends was informal. One student, for example, stated that *“I basically meet friends just by talking to people. That’s how I make friends; just by introducing myself, or they come up and talk to me.”* Another student explained he *“start[s] local, then reach[es] out.”* More specifically, making friends is a process which initially consists of *“start[ing] with someone close by, like a classmate, and then when I go to lunch, for example, I meet some of their friends- I meet my friends’ friends, and I become friends with them, and sometimes even their friends.”* These students have developed friendships by voluntarily introducing themselves to others. They have also succeeded in extending their social network by befriending friends of their friends. These results suggest that students who have informally made friends have managed to do so by taking initiative and by being active in their pursuit of friendship. Apparently, these students had a keen interest in meeting new people and establishing long lasting connections.

Typical Time Spent Together

Five themes were identified as students described a typical time with their friend/s. These themes were media, socializing, sports, eating, and dance. In relation to the media theme, most students explained that time spent with their friends typically consists of *“play[ing] video games, and [watching] movies with best buddies,” “watch[ing] TV,” and “renting movies.”* With respect to the socializing theme, students indicated that they usually hang out with their friends and talk; one student in particular

stated that he spends time with his friend *“talk[ing] a lot about stuff,”* while another student stated that an ideal time with a friend consists of *“two words: act[ing] silly.”* As to the remaining themes, students agreed that spending time with their friends most commonly involves *“go[ing] to sporting events with [their] friends,” “eat[ing],”* and *“go[ing] to the dance studio”* respectively.

Initiating Conversations

Students were asked to indicate whether they would start a conversation with somebody their own age at a dining place within the university setting. Two themes, extrovert and introvert, were extracted based on the personality types suggested by the student responses. In relation to the extrovert theme, one student expressed her interest in other people by explaining how she continuously takes the initiative to *“talk to random people.”* The rest of the students, provided responses implying they might have more introverted personalities. Those students conveyed their tendencies to shy away from other students as well as their difficulties conversing with someone on campus who they have not previously met. Despite their introvert approach towards making new contacts, these same students made it clear that if they are comfortable around and familiar with a person, they might be willing to talk to that person. More specifically, one student indicated that she prefers other people to *“speak to [her] first.”* She will approach other people only in situations where *“they look like a nice person and they act like they’re coming towards [her].”* Another student mentioned that he will not be willing to talk to another person unless that person is *“a friend of [his] friend.”* One student described the shift she underwent from being an introvert to an extrovert. She emphasized that *“the reason why [she] wouldn’t talk to people when [she] was younger [was] because of [her] speech impediment. [She] has always been the quiet one, [and] she didn’t like talking to people. [She] used to be shy, [but] now [she] is the opposite.”* She attributed her success in opening up and effectively communicating her thoughts to other people to the on-campus program; *“this program helped [her] out a lot in speaking up for [her]self and not being scared of speaking up.”*

Handling Disagreements with Friends

One of the themes that emerged as students described ways through which they approach disagreements with friends was compromise. In their responses leading up to the compromise theme, some students made it clear that in situations where their friend appears to be in opposition with their beliefs, they try to meet their friend halfway by proposing a solution that they *“could both agree on.”* One of the students pointed out that even if *“it’s really difficult when the other person is really unreasonable,”* it is important to remain *“as reasonable about it as possible.”* This response is likely to save many friendships that did not survive because of disagreements that arose and failure to arrive at acceptable compromise.

Another theme that was identified was the ability to remain passive while being verbally confronted by a friend. A student, for instance, declared that she is *“very passive when it comes to confrontation. When someone says something [she] do[es]n’t like... [she] would hear them out before [she] start[s] speaking, or [she] would walk away from*

the situation because [she] do[es] not want to hear the argument.” Other students stated that they would normally remain “*calm when it comes to disagreements,*” and most often choose to ignore their friend or not talk to him/her, particularly if that friend is not “*nice*” to them.

Other students provided a different account which could be characterized as assertive in relation to their approach towards disagreements with friends. These students declared that they typically approach an argument or a debate with a friend by means of arguing back. One student specifically stated that she is usually not passive. Rather, she is assertive which is “*the opposite of passive.*” She added: “*if I don’t like what someone is saying, or if they’re confronting me or putting me on the spot, then I will get assertive...*”.

Some of the students believed in the importance of expressing their feelings in the middle of a dispute with a friend. Rather than ignoring their friend, those students would talk back to them and “*tell them what [they] feel.*” In response to the proposition that it is best to ignore a friend in a disagreement, a student argued that “*the problem is not going to be solved that way. You have to explain yourself to the person. If you’re just ignoring the person, then they’re not going to know anything’s wrong; maybe by your looks, but they aren’t going to know what you’re really feeling.*”

Maintaining Friendships

Results indicated three major themes that students perceived as most effective in maintaining a cohesive bond with their friends. Support was a dominant theme that emerged throughout student responses. Responses that produced the support theme included: “*be nice to them, show them that you’re a good friend. Talk to them when they need to talk to you,*” “*don’t talk about them,*” “*help them out, and be with them,*” and “*don’t be mean.*”

Another theme that emerged consisted of maintaining a positive and fun personality. More specifically, students believed that “*personality is the key. If you have a great personality, [then] you can keep friends. If you’re always upbeat and happy, then you can get friends that way. You have to be fun, upbeat, outgoing, [and] very generous.*” Another student emphasized the importance of making an effort to let go of a negative attitude and embrace one which is “*always good and cool and fun.*”

A third theme consisted of spending time together. One student advised that in order to successfully maintain friendships, we need to make sure that we do not alienate our friends; rather we should “*keep them in contact.*” Other students recommended that “*hang[ing] out,*” “*spend[ing] time together*” and “*watch[ing] a movie*”, are essential activities that are helpful in keeping and strengthening friendships.

It is worth noting that most of the student responses contained a combination of at least two or three themes. For instance, one of the students specified that “*we eat, go to the mall, hang out, rent movies, and eat again. And I used to go to the dance studio for a long time.*” These responses are not merely indicative of the fact that students in the study enjoy activities that are typically enjoyed by individuals without disabilities; these responses also portray students with disabilities as being able to extend their friendships across different contexts and situations.

Observation Reflections

Reflections obtained from direct observations and interactions with the students provided information which coincides with some of the emerging themes indicated above. For example, one student's ability to meet and interact with people in an 'informal' manner was evident in her attempt to initiate conversations and to engage in social interactions with typical university students during lunch hour. That observation also appeared to be indicative of the student's extroverted approach towards meeting new people. The introverted nature of some of the students was also observable in the reflection data. More specifically, reflections indicated that when a student was introduced to a friend of one of the researchers, the student seemed a little shy; the same response that was exhibited when that same student was initially introduced to the researcher. Additionally, when the classroom teacher instructed one of the students to have lunch with the researcher, the student rejected the lunch invitation by expressing her lack of familiarity and comfort with the researcher. That was another instance of the students' introverted approach towards socially motivating situations.

Another theme that was evident in the reflection data and that was also apparent in the focus group data was socializing among the students themselves. It was noted that students typically planned on spending time together by hanging out. Two students in particular were observed talking about a concert that they had planned on attending together.

Interestingly, the researchers also noticed instances where even though the students were in inclusive settings, as a group, they sometimes appeared insulated and oblivious to the social cues outside their group. For example, one researcher noted an instance that happened during a lunch outing which involved the participants initiating a slight disturbance in an on-campus fast food restaurant. As the participants were waiting in line to order food, they were talking about the features of their cellular phones. One of the participants from the program carried a cellular phone which had downloaded sounds of various animals; of the sounds, one was of a cat's meow, which was compiled together as a song. The sound coming from the cellular phone was switched to the loudest volume by the participant, which seemed to disturb the people dining at the fast food restaurant. However, the participants did not seem to acknowledge the glances from others that were present in the restaurant, though no one explicitly told the participant to lower the volume of the cellular device. The participants as a group did not seem to notice any cues from the people around them and continued to make noise with the phone.

Discussion and Recommendations

The focus group responses revealed that the participants indeed have friends, mostly formed by guided help in the transition program but also by venturing out on their own by opening up and initiating conversation with others. The data suggests that the long term "friends" are inferred to be formed from "guided help," as the students noted that they have formed friends through school and school programs. However, the students also reported that they associate more regularly with friends from the program in and out of school. For example, during observations students were overheard talking about going to a concert and hanging out after the program. The route that participants take in maintaining their friendships was found to be varied. Also, friendships that students were able to form were either facilitated outside of the school environment by their parents or

were made inside the school setting. Student responses, particularly those provided by students in relation to friendships initiated by their parents, contained no evidence of intentional or deliberate interactions with people. Those results therefore indicated a more passive approach towards meeting and developing new friendships. The researchers do not know if the students would have taken initiative had their parents not interfered or helped.

Another factor for which there is not enough evidence has to do with whether the parents assisted the students because they judged that their son/daughter had an introvert personality and needed help making friends or if it was because of logistical circumstances like transportation. Further, even though some friendships were developed in a formal and restricted way, we need to be cautious in assuming, however, that the students were passive in their attempts to initiate social interactions leading to those friendships. They might have been very well active in their approach to make friends which they might have failed to document in their responses.

Evidence based on the data obtained from the study counters the findings obtained by Weni-Gross and Siperstein (1997). In their study, children with learning problems did not emphasize the importance of the features of reliability, communication, and the provision of emotional support in the building of a cohesive friendship. In contrast, our participants characterized their friendships as primarily consisting of companionship, emotional support and an enhancement of their sense of well-being and belonging. Additionally, our respondents shared that friendship presents all parties involved with opportunities to engage in self-awareness and reflection.

The quality of friendships observed among our participants indicates that they focus on continuing friendship, as they are in the program together and spend more time together (referring to the response received when asked “how long have you been friends” in focus group); as opposed to typical students who have different classes, instructors, grade levels, etc. Long-term association with people out of the program seems to be less prevalent because the needs of both sides of friendship are different. The support that is given and taken from the participants with people from out of program is mostly unequal. The impact of unbalanced support in friendship is supported by the data obtained from the focus group, when the participants indicated that equalized “give and take” of support is essential in stable friendships. Instead of emphasizing reciprocity and mutuality as key components of friendships, students’ responses implied a one sided relationship.

The way that friendship was defined by the participants was more of a listing of characteristics of what they considered friendship to be instead of one single definition. This variation of understandings about friendship was observed during on-campus observations, as individuals who seemed to connect well with each other expressed similar definitions of friendship. The individuals who portrayed themselves as “best friends” during regular observation also discussed during the focus group session traits that they believe are important components of good friendship like just “hanging out” and “having fun” together

Even though some of the participants made it clear they would handle disagreements with their friends either by being assertive or by talking back to them and communicating their feelings, other participants believed in reaching a compromise and remaining passive in the middle of a dispute. Friendships often break down in the face of

disagreements, even if the disagreements could have been resolved by sincere efforts to preserve it. A measure of true friendship, portrayed by the majority of the participants, is the ability to withstand disagreements.

As noted above, the participants may associate more closely with other individuals introduced by “guided help” and through the school programs because some may lack means to connect independently outside of school time. It is worth noting that a major feature of the on-campus program is a focus on training in independent transportation using the public bus system. We have observed that some of the students travel via public bus to campus independently after school hours to participate in campus activities and in addition, after they exit or “graduate” from the program, some students continue to visit campus independently using public transportation. Thus, specific components of the transition program can be tied directly to the participants’ development into adulthood and independence, especially with regard to opportunities for socialization.

Similar to other studies (Meyer & Ostrosky, 2014; Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2015) the quality of friendships reported by the participants did not differ from the quality of friendship that is normally experienced by typically developing peers. Specifically, friendship definitions in the study included themes of companionship and emotional support, both of which are universal characteristics of friendship. Such findings are intriguing particularly because they demonstrate that students identified with intellectual disabilities possess interpersonal awareness or theory of mind. This is in contrast with prevailing notions regarding individuals with disabilities and theory of mind. According to the theory of mind, individuals with disabilities are often unable to perceive the world from the lens of other individuals. Results of the study seem to have indicated that attributes of theory of mind did not significantly interfere with the nature of friendships experienced by individuals with disabilities (Bossaert, Colpin, Pijl, & Petry, 2015).

Despite the interpersonal and emotional awareness evident in their responses, participants in this study seem to have provided a one sided, rather than a two sided definition of friendship. For example, some of the participants’ idea of a friend consisted of someone who is reliable and with whom secrets can be shared. A friend is also someone that is always available and that is willing to provide help and support. Similarly, when comparing the quality of friendships experienced by individuals with disabilities and individuals without disabilities, Tipton, Christensen and Blacher (2012) concluded that the levels of positive reciprocity in friendships of individuals with disabilities was significantly lower than that of individuals without disabilities. Such notions of what a friend is lie in contrast to the definitions of friendships evident in a meta-analysis conducted by Meyer and Ostrosky (2014) in which the theme of reciprocal friendships was predominantly evident in the majority of the reviewed studies. Specifically, friendship was identified as a ‘mutual interest in spending time or playing together,’ a ‘dyadic relationship between peers,’ and ‘the child wanting to be friends with another child and the other child also wanting to be friends.’

In conclusion, this study sought to explore the nature of friendships among a group of students participating in a university based transition program for young adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Not surprisingly, we found that in many ways the relationships and activities these students described appeared very typical of

college age individuals. However, we also found reluctance on the part of some students to venture outside the confines of the program to initiate contacts with non-program participants. Also, some of the relationships described included references to adult facilitation which could be directly related to reluctance of the adults, including parents, to relinquish supervision.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This study solely focused on the perceptions of friendship of a group of students identified with disabilities. Examining the perceptions of a group of students without disabilities and identifying similarities and differences obtained across both groups of students would have likely provided additional insight. Frequent observations of students as they interacted in the university environment were conducted and documented. These observations have proven to be a critical component of the study because they have provided the opportunity to note information in relation to students' social interactions and behaviors directly as they occurred. These observations have also provided us with the opportunity to make note of behaviors of students who had difficulties verbalizing their level of social interactions and perceptions on friendships as a whole. Despite their effectiveness, there were some limitations associated with conducting observations. For instance, we were limited to only one observation site: the university environment. Observations of the level and the quality of social behaviors and interactions are not necessarily extended and exhibited beyond the university setting. Future research should therefore be geared towards gathering more extensive data, and conducting interviews and observations in a variety of settings.

Some limitations associated with conducting a focus group were evident. One of these limitations involved the number of students who participated in the focus group session. The number of students whose perceptions on friendship were assessed and examined was fourteen and so our analysis is limited to the perceptions of the individuals. Another limitation consists of the possibility of students providing responses only because they were in line with previous responses provided by the other students- despite the fact that those responses might have been inconsistent with their own thoughts and perceptions. Furthermore, it was observed that some students managed to dominate the focus group session, as opposed to the other students who appeared to be more passive. Future research should therefore consist of designing interview questions that are individually administered to students. Finally, future research should further explore friendships among the participants after leaving the program to ascertain how the friendships continue without the structured environment and guided help. In-depth interviews with individual participants or friendship pairs of students would provide an opportunity for elaboration on the nature of the students' relationships.

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