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# “Not sure how to approach them the right way”: nondisabled students’ perspectives on friendship with peers with I/DD

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## PERSPECTIVES ON FRIENDSHIP

### **Abstract**

Friendships are personally valuable and developmentally important relationships for all people, yet friendships between students with and without intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD) remain infrequent, even in inclusive settings. Extant research indicates that opportunity barriers may play a more prominent role in friendship development than the social skills of students with I/DD. Further, friendships are reciprocal and mutual relationships involving two or more people. Thus, we situated our study within the social context for friendship rather than focusing only on the skills—and presumed deficits—of students with I/DD. As peers without disabilities are an integral part of that social context, we examined nondisabled students' perspectives on friendship via four focus group interviews with 44 first to eleventh graders. Thematic findings indicated that students with I/DD were not viewed as potential friends and that students with and without I/DD had few opportunities to interact authentically.

*Keywords:* Friendship, intellectual and/or developmental disabilities, social contact, social interaction opportunities, inclusive education

**“Not sure how to approach them the right way”: Nondisabled students’ perspectives on friendship with peers with I/DD**

Friendships are personally valuable and developmentally important relationships. People with friends are happier, healthier, and safer (Author, 2017). Friendships are defined as mutually chosen and reciprocal relationships in which two (or more) individuals exhibit frequent companionship and enjoyment (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). The positive effects of friendship are uniquely reinforcing because they operate on multiple levels. First, friendship results in emotional well-being, a sense of belonging, fewer depressive symptoms, and greater social adjustment (Berndt, 2004; Cheng & Furnham, 2002; Waldrip et al., 2008). Second, the friendship itself becomes a vehicle for social, emotional, and developmental gains (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011; Bukowski & Sippola, 2005).

Friendships are critical for the individual well-being and development of people with intellectual and/or developmental disabilities (I/DD). This includes those with intellectual disability (ID), a developmental disability such as autism or cerebral palsy, or both. People with I/DD who have friends are more likely to experience have a higher quality of life manifested by participating in the community; having intimate relationships; being safe, healthy, and respected; and enacting agency to make choices and achieve personal goals (Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018). However, extant research indicates that individuals with I/DD tend to be socially isolated, on the social periphery of inclusive settings, and less likely to interact with nondisabled<sup>1</sup> peers outside school. At all ages, individuals with ID tend to interact only with family, paid staff, and others with ID (Bogenschutz et al., 2015). Adolescents with ID compared to those without ID had lower

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<sup>1</sup> I purposefully use both *nondisabled students* and *students without disabilities* interchangeably to acknowledge disability as a significant personal identity (i.e., Identity-first language) and to communicate respect for the personhood of people labeled with disabilities (i.e., Person-first language).

quality and less reciprocal social relationships and spent less time with friends or peers outside of school (Tipton et al., 2013). Students with I/DD, infrequently participate in extracurricular activities after school or other shared activities with nondisabled peers either at or outside of school (Agran et al., 2017; Carter, 2018). Social relationships between students with and without autism tend to be low in quality (e.g., shorter duration, lower levels of companionship) and unilateral (Petrina et al., 2014). Despite the common recognition of the importance of friendships for all people, students with I/DD remain at risk of social isolation and loneliness.

To address the challenge of friendships, intervention in special education has focused on improving the social skills of students with I/DD (Lyons et al., 2016). However, social skills interventions (SSI) focusing only on students with I/DD are not sufficient for friendship development (Finke, 2016). SSI often are implemented in clinical versus natural settings, which impedes social interaction opportunities and generalization (Bellini et al., 2007; Finke, 2016). Additionally, SSI tend to focus on static rules and interactions related to general relationship building rather than the dynamic and individualized processes of specific friendships (Bottema-Beutel, et al., 2018). This suggests a readiness model for friendships that may not be frequently achieved due to limited generalization and infrequent social opportunities with peers. Further, by emphasizing static social rules and interaction skills, SSI may limit authentic interactions by individuals with I/DD and perpetuate neurotypical ways of being as the norm (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2018). Finally, friendships are reciprocal and mutual relationships involving two or more people (Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). Focusing only on one half of the friendship dyad is insufficient. In fact, friendship development often requires that nondisabled students learn specific social interaction skills, too (Author, 2011).

Alternately, a growing body of research indicates that opportunity barriers may play a more prominent role in friendship development than the social skills of students with I/DD (Author, 2018; 2016; Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Kalymon et al., 2010; Matheson et al., 2007). In other words, students with I/DD, including those who have the most significant support needs and/or complex communication needs, can develop authentic friendships with nondisabled peers when they have the opportunities and individualized supports to do so (Author, 2018; Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020; Østvik et al., 2018). For example, peer-mediated interventions (e.g., peer support arrangements, peer networks) focus on both students with and without I/DD and promote social interaction opportunities in academic and social contexts, resulting in positive social outcomes including friendship development or maintenance (Brock & Huber, 2017; Travers & Carter, 2022). Thus, a more promising approach to promoting friendships between students with and without I/DD may be to examine and intervene within the full social context in which friendships are developed. This social context includes not just students with I/DD, but their nondisabled classmates, adults who may provide supports (e.g., family members, teachers, paraprofessionals, related service providers), the social environment (e.g., classroom, school, or community setting), and the social interaction opportunities in that environment.

Nondisabled students are an integral component of the social context for development of friendships between students with and without I/DD. Yet, extant research suggests that, without intervention, nondisabled students hold deficit views of disability, resulting in stigmatization of their peers with I/DD and limitations to the possibility of friendship. Nondisabled students report being uncomfortable interacting with students with I/DD, especially students with I/DD who have the most significant support needs and are seen as less socially capable (Brown et al., 2011; Kalymon et al., 2010; Shokoohi-Yekta & Hendrickson, 2010). Nondisabled students report being

comfortable greeting students with I/DD (Fisher et al., 1998; Siperstein et al., 2007) or helping them (Brown et al., 2011), but not with social roles (Brown et al., 2011; Kalymon et al., 2010) or interacting outside school (Fisher et al., 1998; Siperstein et al., 2007). It is vital to understand and address this perceptions-based limitation in interactions because friendship consists of more than just greetings or working together, and it occurs in and out of school (Author, 2016). Recent research examining effects of peer-mediated interventions on nondisabled peers suggests that such intervention increases interactions between students with and without I/DD, that the interactions are meaningful, and can result in attitudinal and behavioral changes by nondisabled peers regarding their classmates with I/DD (Schaefer et al., 2016; Travers & Carter, 2022).

Reflective of the importance of social context, and specifically social interaction opportunities, the guiding theoretical framework for this study was Allport's (1954) Intergroup Contact Theory (ICT), which suggests that interpersonal contact can reduce misunderstanding and prejudice between individuals with different characteristics or who belong to or are identified with majority and minority groups. Originally intended for those who differ by conceptions of race or ethnicity, researchers have used contact theory in studies examining contact between students with and without disabilities (Kalymon et al., 2010; Pettigrew et al., 2011). We approached this study recognizing that societal ableism and a separate special education system in schools may socialize nondisabled students into perceiving students with I/DD with a deficit lens. Regarding intergroup contact, Allport emphasized several optimal conditions for reducing misunderstanding or prejudice, including equal status among groups, frequent interactions repeated over time, and meaningful personal interactions (e.g., working toward a common goal). Prior studies found that reduction of anxiety about the other group was a key mechanism for reducing prejudice through contact (Pettigrew et al., 2011). Situated within

the context of this study, ICT supports our emphasis on the social context within which friendships between students with and without I/DD may develop or be maintained and provides possible conditions (i.e., equal status, frequent interactions, and meaningful interactions) upon which to focus.

Recognizing the importance of friendship for all people and the complexity of social interactions between students with and without I/DD, this study is situated within the social context for friendship rather than focusing only on the skills—and presumed deficits—of students with I/DD. We focused on nondisabled students because they are an integral component of that social context, yet extant research indicates they may not view students with I/DD as potential friends. We focused on students at all grade levels because friendship shares value and some similarities for students of all ages yet may be enacted differently in different contexts (Selman, 1980). We were interested in nondisabled students' perceptions; they did not participate in any type of intervention. Three research questions guided this study: How do nondisabled students define friendship? What do nondisabled students do with their friends? How do nondisabled students perceive the possibility of friendship with students with I/DD? The first two questions provide context and a point of comparison for the third question, which is the focus of the study.

### **Method**

Because of the exploratory nature of this study's research questions and its focus on a complex social phenomenon (i.e., friendship), we used a qualitative research design. Specifically, we employed a generalist design, which uses qualitative methods for data collection (e.g., interviews, focus groups) and analysis (i.e., inductive analysis, Thomas, 2006), but does not adhere to a specific methodology (e.g., case study, ethnography; Lauterbach et al., 2022). We

collected data through focus group interviews to facilitate a context in which participants develop perspectives and researchers collect rich data from participants' interactions within the group (Morgan, 1996). The data were analyzed systematically and inductively to emphasize how participants made meaning individually and collectively of the possibility of friendships with peers with I/DD. As such, this study was conducted with a social constructionist epistemological lens, which emphasizes the collective (versus the individual) process of meaning making and is a methodological fit with focus groups (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2009). Social constructionism holds that there are not objective, immutable truths in the world, but contextualized knowledge created and perpetuated socially in groups.

### **Participants**

Focus groups were conducted with 44 students in first through eleventh grade from the two elementary schools ( $n= 16$ ), middle school ( $n= 19$ ), and high school ( $n= 9$ ) in a public school district in the northeastern United States. The district's student population of about 1,600 total students was 85.8% White, 5.4% Hispanic, 4% Multi-Race Non-Hispanic, 1.9% Asian, 1.8% Black or African American, and 0% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander. I used stratified purposeful sampling to recruit nondisabled students from the elementary, middle, and high school grades. Half of the students were female, and half were male.

This study was part of a larger project focused on friendships between students with and without I/DD in which the author and the school district collaborated. The district special education director and each school's principal contributed by helping to identify nondisabled students who interacted with classmates with I/DD that were interested in participating in the study and to schedule focus groups. I did not collect data about participants' prior or current experiences with peers with disabilities.

***Elementary School 1***

The six students in this group, three female and three male, were all fourth graders. The school's social worker coordinated a formal group of what she described as school leaders who acted as peer problem-solving mediators during recess. The social worker described the study to students in this larger group, and these six students agreed to participate in the study. This school had two substantially separate classrooms for students with I/DD. Students with and without I/DD were together during lunch, recess, and classes such as art, music and P.E. One separate class hosted nondisabled students to have snack and social time with them twice a week.

***Elementary School 2***

The 10 students in this group, six female and four male, ranged from first to fourth grade. There were two first graders, two second graders, five third graders, and one fourth grader. The school's speech pathologist coordinated social emotional learning activities with alternating, multi-grade groups of students during lunch. The speech pathologist described the study to that larger group of students, and 10 students agreed to participate. Two students disclosed that they had autistic siblings during this focus group. This school had two substantially separate classrooms for students with I/DD. Students with and without I/DD were together during lunch, recess, and classes such as art, music and P.E.

***Middle School***

The 19 students in this group, nine female and 10 male, ranged from fifth to eighth grade. There were four eighth graders, and five students each from the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades. The school principal coordinated with teachers to solicit participants from each grade level. This school had several substantially separate classrooms for students with I/DD or behavioral support

needs. Students with and without I/DD were together during lunch and recess, and some participated in a bi-weekly inclusive social club after school.

### ***High school***

The nine students, four female and five male, ranged from ninth to eleventh grade with three students each from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh grades. The guidance counselor and a special education teacher recruited from a larger group of students who regularly met with students with I/DD in the special educator's classroom during a shared free period. The nine participants were part of this larger group. The school had several substantially separate classrooms for students with I/DD or behavior support needs. During the study, these educators (and others) initiated the process to implement a unified sports program at the school.

### **Researcher Reflexivity**

I have long valued inclusive education in large part due to the increased quantity and quality of social interaction opportunities between and among students with and without I/DD. As a white, nondisabled, cisgender male professor who grew up with a brother with I/DD and worked as a special education teacher and inclusion facilitator with students with I/DD, I have seen that friendship remains an unrealized promise for many students with I/DD. Recognizing that too many nondisabled students only greeted peers with I/DD in the hallways or worked together in class, thus missing out on the privilege of a deeper connection with more meaningful interactions, I approached this study believing that students with I/DD and extensive support needs *can* and *should* experience authentic friendship with nondisabled peers. The study was designed to identify new information to help promote authentic friendships between students with and without I/DD. I regularly discussed data analysis with peer debriefers and rigorously adhered to the coding protocol to remain grounded in the data and achieve the underlying

methodological goal of understanding how the participants made meaning of friendship in their specific context.

## **Procedures**

### ***Data Collection***

The author's Institutional Review Board approved all procedures. Focus groups are particularly valuable in creating a context in which researchers can collect rich data emerging from participants' interactions in the group (Creswell, 2013). I was interested in how nondisabled students individually and collectively defined friendship and made meaning of friendships with peers with IDD. I also felt focus groups were the most practical method due to the age of the participants, the difficulty scheduling individual interviews, and the desire to impinge as little as possible on academic time. I conducted one focus group at each school during the spring. I chose spring purposefully, assuming that students would be familiar with their classmates by then, thus ensuring focus groups would not be impacted by the relative lack of familiarity with each other earlier in the school year. Each of the four focus groups took place during the school day in a meeting room at the school the students attended. No incentives were given to the students. Each focus group began by reading the student-friendly study description and assent statement. All students assented to participate in the study.

I conducted each focus group. The focus group protocol included five core questions (What is friendship? What do you like to do with your friends (outside of school)? What is a disability? Does anyone have a friend who has a disability? Is there anything teachers could do to help students with disabilities have more friends?) with follow-up prompts. All five questions were asked during each focus group. The follow-up questions were not asked if they were addressed by student responses. Two focus groups (HS and elementary school 1) lasted 20 and

24 min respectively, and two (MS and elementary school 2) lasted 37 and 38 min respectively. The longer times occurred with the larger groups. I wrote open-ended field notes during each focus group to capture participants' non-spoken responses and interactions that were not apparent on the audio recording, as well as researcher memos after focus groups (e.g., details about the group) and during data analysis (e.g., emerging patterns and themes). The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, and checked for accuracy against the recording. Transcriptions (104), field notes (64), and researcher memos (24) yielded 192 double-spaced pages of written data.

### ***Data Analysis***

Analysis was systematic and inductive, aiming to capture participants' perspectives on friendship and developing friendships with students with I/DD. I engaged in a two-stage process of open and thematic coding (Creswell, 2013). First, I read each transcription two to three times to become familiar with them. Then, I coded each transcription by hand, marking data units with key words to highlight statements that were important to the research questions, those that reflected key ICT components (i.e., equal status, repeated interactions over time, meaningful personal interactions, reduction of anxiety), and those that were unique ideas and possible outliers (Bogdan & Biklen, 2004). I reviewed codes with a peer debriefer and developed a codebook with coding categories, primary codes, and secondary codes. Within each category, I grouped related data units (primary codes) and further classified types of responses in each group (secondary codes).

The codebook ultimately included four code categories, largely reflecting the research questions: Definition of Friendship, Activities with Friends, Friendship Barriers, and Friendship Facilitators. The Activities with Friends category included short, straightforward responses, thus

only had primary codes (i.e., the activities participants described engaging in with their friends). I tallied these codes to present the participants' most frequent activities with friends. Similarly, I tallied the codes for the Definition of Friendship category to identify components of friendship most frequently cited by participants. I utilized code frequencies for these specific reasons, though qualitative analysis does not generally rely on quantification of data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2004). The other two categories included multiple primary codes with at least two secondary codes each. For example, Friendship Facilitators included three primary codes (Teacher Support, Peer Support, and Inclusive/Supportive Practices), and each of these included multiple secondary codes (e.g., specific types of Teacher Support). There were 63 codes across the four categories.

During thematic coding, analysis refocused on the broader level of themes rather than codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2004). I developed thematic maps (i.e., visual depiction of how codes and categories are related) based on patterns in the coded data and interpretation of participant perspectives. I identified themes by focusing on connections among and between primary and secondary codes (e.g., grouping secondary codes with specific primary codes) and between the coding categories (e.g., discussing how categories were related). For example, I identified the theme about authenticity of friendship including distinctions between formal and informal interactions by noting differences in what participants described doing with their friends (without I/DD) and how they interacted with peers with I/DD, which was then reinforced by some of the barriers participants described, which I also cross-referenced with their definitions of friendship. I iteratively reviewed and discussed the thematic maps with peer debriefers, especially in the context of ICT's optimal conditions for reducing misunderstanding or prejudice among hierarchical groups (i.e., equal status, repeated interactions over time, meaningful personal interactions, reduction of anxiety). Despite not observing student interactions myself,

participants spoke about their interactions and contact with peers with I/DD, as well as with nondisabled peers, which I used as a comparison. ICT helped me recognize the problematic differences in contact and allowed for further theme development and organization, thus strengthening the analysis. Reflective of the stratified sample, I also examined themes by grade level (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school), noting similarities and differences across these grade bands.

### **Trustworthiness**

Regarding quality indicators of interview studies (Brantlinger et al., 2005), I selected appropriate participants based on specific criteria, developed reasonable interview questions based on the literature, recorded and transcribed all focus groups verbatim, and maintained confidentiality. I also utilized multiple measures to establish credibility of data analysis: researcher reflexivity and peer debriefing (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Peer debriefing occurred by discussing the early stages of analysis (i.e., open coding and codebook development) and then the annotated findings with a qualitative researcher in special and inclusive education, resulting in a sharper focus on nondisabled students' comfort levels interacting with peers with I/DD (e.g., formal and informal interactions) and affirmation of the thematic map.

### **Findings**

This study examined how nondisabled students perceived friendships, particularly friendships with students with I/DD. The findings center on definitions of friendship, activities participants described engaging in with their friends, and perceived barriers to and facilitators of friendships between students with and without I/DD. We also noted grade level differences. Notably, participants did not describe being friends with any students with I/DD.

**Friendship Definitions: “You can get closer with them and share more secretive stuff.”**

The participants defined friendship predominantly in terms of kindness and trust/loyalty (Table 1). Thus, they viewed friendship as a caring relationship with someone of integrity who was authentic and honest. Particularly in elementary school, a friend was someone who acted nicely to the participants. For example, a fourth grader explained, “You know if they’re a friend depending on how they treat you. If they’re treating you nicely and saying nice things to you, then you know definitely that they’re your friend.” Several students included non-examples of kindness to clarify their definitions, such as the following from a third grader:

If you’re really excited about something and you tell your friend and they know you’re excited and they know you’ve been waiting, like, for a while or something, if they say, like, “Whatever. I don’t care. You’re weird,” then that’s, like, not a good friend. A friend would say, “Oh, cool!,” not be like, “Oh, that’s weird. I don’t care about that.”

The non-examples primarily consisted of peers who engaged in name-calling or made other statements the participants viewed as malicious or unfriendly. By focusing on kindness manifested as acting nicely to others, the students grounded friendship in their feelings during interpersonal interactions. A fourth grader succinctly explained this, stating, “They’re [friends] supposed to make you happy, not sad.” They viewed this as a clear-cut dynamic, though how one feels in relation to another’s behaviors would depend on their specific context.

In addition to kindness, participants at all grade levels viewed friendship as consisting of trust and loyalty. First, they viewed friends as peers they could talk to and who would listen to them: “Like, if you’re, like, telling them something and they listen to you.” Additionally, friends could be trusted to maintain these conversations and not share them publicly or say anything unkind about the participants to others. In middle school, notions of trust and loyalty matured in specific ways. In particular, the middle school students spoke frequently about authenticity

regarding friendship. For example, an eighth-grade student explained that she looks for a friend “who acts the same no matter what type of situation they’re in.” Another middle school student stated, “I like people who can act like themselves around me. Like, they don’t have to protect themselves or lie or anything. They can always just tell the truth.” These and other similar comments by the middle school participants reflected a tumultuous social context in which students were (admittedly) grappling with issues of identity and social status.

The high school students described friendships as consisting of stronger connections or bonds than other social relationships. A tenth-grade student explained this distinction:

An acquaintance is more of a person you, like, have conversations with, or like, you can talk to even if it’s just about the weather or something like that. And a friend is someone you can tell your secrets to or something that’s really troubling you, know what I mean?

You can get more, like, I don’t want to say intimate, but you can get closer with them and share more secretive stuff.

The students felt this strong connection between friends also allowed them to be more informal than they would be with peers who were not friends. An eleventh-grade student described, “If you have an acquaintance, they’ll have, like, a nice conversation, then be kinda, like, formal. But, if you’re really close with someone, like, sometimes you’ll just tease them and, you know, joke around with them and they’ll kinda just, you know, understand.” In this sense, the connection of friendship allowed students to be themselves and to be at ease, not worrying about how they should interact. With acquaintances, they would revert to formal or inauthentic interactions in the absence of that connection. In a friendship, participants felt confident and comfortable interacting authentically even if it were informally because they knew if they teased their friend or their friend teased them that it was not malicious and would not negatively affect

their established friendship. In fact, the informal nature of the interactions manifested the strong social connection as friends and was perceived to be more authentic than the formal, sometimes strained, interactions with acquaintances.

**Friendship Activities: “I like to just, like, chill with my friends.”**

Participants responded to a single prompt asking them what they usually like to do with their friends. The most prevalent activities with friends were engaging in sports (e.g., football, basketball, soccer) or outdoor activities (e.g., go to the beach or park, go for a walk or a hike), and hanging out and talking. The elementary school students were primarily activity-based with their friends, as all but one of them engaged in sports or outdoor activities with friends. Over half of them also engaged in “other activities” such as drawing, dancing, designing an obstacle course, and going out for ice cream together. Many of these activities were scheduled ahead of time (e.g., playdates, spending time together after youth sports), and their parents were still largely involved in their social lives as the schedulers and drivers.

This dynamic of parent involvement and scheduling specific activities changed in secondary school, as students controlled their own social lives and became more independent. In middle and high school, being together took priority over the specific type of shared activity. Secondary students spent time with friends “just hanging out and talking,” as many participants responded verbatim. They described their shared social time as typically being spontaneous. Friends often continued to hang out together after school (e.g., walk home together, go to the park or beach), or they texted each other to meet up after school and on the weekends. The middle and high school students described that their busy schedules (e.g., jobs, sports, and after-school clubs) were a significant part of their social context, both preventing some social opportunities and structuring their social time with those also engaged in these activities.

**Barriers to Friendship with Students with I/DD: “People don’t really know how to react to them.”**

*Deficit Views of Behaviors, Skills, and Communication*

Participants across all grade levels were very clear that, for them, potential barriers to friendship included what they perceived as challenging behaviors and communication difficulties of students with I/DD, as well as prior negative experiences with classmates with I/DD. As such, the barriers reflected an overall negative and stigmatizing view of students with I/DD. For some of the elementary school students, the negative view manifested as thinking that the unexpected behaviors displayed by students with I/DD in class were funny or scary. For example, a fourth grader explained, “Honestly, sometimes when kids, um, with disabilities, when they do stuff that’s, like, when they act out, honestly, I try not to laugh because it’s a little hard not to.” Several others smiled and nodded in agreement. They explained some of the behaviors to which they were referring, including interruptions (e.g., “like what they say sometimes...they’ll swear”), disruptions (e.g., “run around the classroom and throw chairs”) and perceived aggression (e.g., “he would stab people with pencils”). As different participants offered these examples of behaviors, the others smiled at each other and tried to stifle their laughter. One student told two others next to her to stop laughing about one of the examples. Students also looked toward me (first author) seeming to check for my response to their laughter, which I interpreted as reflecting ambivalence towards interacting with classmates with I/DD. They knew they should not laugh at their classmates with I/DD, yet found some of these behaviors humorous, and ultimately were confused about how to interact with them. A middle school student shared another behavioral example: “Sometimes I don’t really like- not everyone who has a disability- sometimes they interrupt you when you’re introducing yourself.” Other

participants nodded in agreement or shared similar examples with those near them. Participants described that their teachers frequently ignored or tried to ignore the interruptions and smaller disruptions. While teachers responded to the larger disruptive behaviors, participants stated that their teachers did not often address these issues explicitly or explain them to the class. Thus, participants did not fully understand what was happening and why their classmates with I/DD engaged in these unexpected behaviors in the inclusive classroom.

The secondary students described as barriers the skills they perceived students with I/DD struggled with (e.g., mathematics) or could not do (e.g., communicate by speaking). Their negative perceptions of capabilities of students with I/DD, resulted in viewing them as inherently unable to engage, interact, or participate in academics and social interactions as they did. Participants stated matter-of-factly that their peers with I/DD lagged behind them in class work and were too slow during social interactions. Regarding communication, several participants described not understanding students with I/DD when they spoke to them and being unsure what to do in that moment. Their responses reflected a seeming commonly held or accepted deficit orientation toward students with I/DD that manifested as an assumption of inherently stigmatized difference rendering them unfit. Participants' responses implicitly indicated that students with I/DD were not even perceived as social peers or thought of as potential friends.

### ***Lack of Opportunities***

Participants mentioned a second barrier related to the lack of opportunities to interact when students with I/DD were excluded from their nondisabled peers: "They take them [students with I/DD] to, like, different classrooms so you're not able to be, like, partners with them or talk to them" (middle school student). Most other students nodded or shared similar descriptions with students near them. Another middle school student raised his hand and immediately added,

“Yeah, they kind of, like, separate them [students with I/DD] from us.” A high school student further clarified this perspective, adding the negative consequences, especially in the context of limited social time during the school day:

I think, separate programs and separate classrooms, then you don’t really have the chance to get to know them [students with I/DD] more because you only see them, like, maybe in the hallway. It’s not like you can stop to have a conversation with them or anything.

Participants described that when students with and without I/DD do not share time and space together, they are unable to get to know each other and engage in common experiences that lead to greater understanding of and comfort with each other.

### ***Lack of Comfort Leads to Inauthentic Interactions***

Notably, the barrier that seemed to resonate the most with participants was the secondary students’ comfort levels and perceived skills to interact with peers with I/DD. A high school junior explained, “I feel like kids without disabilities are a little intimidated to try and become friends with kids with disabilities, and I think the thought of that is kind of tough to wrap your head around if you don’t, like, understand.” Several students tried to explain this dynamic. A high school sophomore stated, “Probably because they [nondisabled students] think it’s just, like, kinda hard to connect with them [students with I/DD].” Another junior added, “Not sure how to approach them [students with I/DD] the right way.” During this part of the high school focus group, the participants sat up in their chairs and were pointing at each other and adding their statements immediately after the preceding ones. It was the strongest example of socially constructed meaning-making. A middle school student also shared, “Like, being afraid to say the wrong thing and maybe offending them [students with I/DD] or, like, scaring them a bit.” In the middle and high school focus groups, almost all the participants nodded emphatically in

agreement and added to these discussions. Participants voiced a common concern about being unsure how to interact with classmates with I/DD and feeling so uncomfortable that the situation intimidated them.

In the absence of comfort and confidence interacting with peers with I/DD, participants described defaulting to inauthentic interactions. A high school junior explained, “I think, like, people don’t really know how to react to them, you know what I mean? Like, if somebody has a disability, you don’t really know how to interact with them, so they tend to be more formal and stuff like that.” This dynamic was the opposite of, and thus reinforced, the secondary students’ description of friendship being such a strong bond that students felt they could be more authentic and *informal* with their friends. Additionally, several students added a related barrier they often observed in which nondisabled students interacted as a helper with classmates with I/DD rather than as a peer in a reciprocal relationship. One high school student explained, “Kids want to be a helper more than anything, like, try to tell them what to do.” This supportive interaction from the helper role seemed to be more natural and comfortable, though inauthentic and formal, in the absence of knowing how to interact comfortably and reciprocally as social peers or friends.

**Friendship Facilitators: “See if they have common interests.”**

### ***Teachers as Facilitators***

Participants at all grade levels emphasized the role of teachers in facilitating friendships between students with and without I/DD. This role included several specific ways that teachers could purposefully and proactively increase social interaction opportunities (i.e., social contact) between students with and without I/DD. Elementary students suggested that teachers could arrange a specific time and place for students with and without I/DD to interact. This type of support seemed comparable to how parents or other family members scheduled playdates outside

of school for them. Participants from both elementary school focus groups mentioned recess as the primary time and place teachers should address. For example, a fourth grader stated, “Maybe at recess sometimes the teachers will assign some kids, maybe ask them to go play with one of the kids who has a disability.” Similarly, a third grader expanded on the social focus at recess:

Maybe the teachers can set up a group and at recess, these people, anyone can join in, like a club, group thing. Anybody can join in even if they don’t have a disability or they do, they just join in, and the teacher might pick partners and you just sit down and talk to each other and get to know each other. Maybe, like play games or make up secret handshakes or something just, like, to get people together.

Participants across all grade levels felt that teachers should group students with and without I/DD so they can spend time together. A third grader recommended, “The teacher might pick partners and you just sit down and talk to each other and get to know each other.” The secondary students also mentioned this strategy, especially grouping those with similar interests and focusing on engagement in shared activities. A middle school student suggested, “I think maybe teachers could, like, see if they have common interests with anybody that could compare. Maybe, like, if during a free time like seminar when they’re not really doing anything, like, they’re doing a project or something.” A high school junior explained the importance of the shared activity: “One of my friends I made at work. If you’re working towards a purpose, like, you get to know somebody a little better. You’re both being productive trying to get something done.” Having a common goal resulted in a bonding experience, and it also became the focus of the interaction rather than the interaction itself. It allowed the students to interact more naturally while engaging in the activity together as opposed to the potential awkwardness—and formality—of focusing on interacting in the absence of a shared activity.

### *Equitable Treatment by Teachers*

Several students, all in middle school, emphasized that teachers should treat students with and without I/DD more equally or similarly. One student succinctly stated, “The teachers could treat the disabled kids like they treat the non-disabled.” The students described multiple examples of perceiving teachers being too lenient with students with I/DD (e.g., “they let them get away with things”), as well as too severe or harsh with them (e.g., “they send them out of the room if they do something”). The equal treatment would function to reduce negative feelings by nondisabled students regarding fairness and equitable treatment, and to show them that students with I/DD are indeed social peers and in the pool of potential friends.

### **Discussion**

This generalist qualitative study examined the perspectives of nondisabled elementary, middle, and high school students on friendship, particularly friendships with students with I/DD. Participants defined friendship, described what they like to do with their nondisabled friends, and discussed the possibility of friendships with students with I/DD. Using ICT and a general inductive approach to understand participants’ descriptions of social contact between students with and without I/DD, the findings point to the importance of addressing the social context for friendship development rather than focusing predominantly on the social skills of students with I/DD.

Participants’ definitions of friendship extended findings of prior studies by highlighting not just characteristics of their relationships but the social processes of friendship development. By emphasizing kindness in their definitions, participants in elementary school indicated the importance of behavioral enactments (i.e., being kind) resulting in a positive affective response or feeling, which reflects the process of friendship development in which friends develop both

behavioral and affective reciprocity (Mendelson et al., 2016). Their definitions emphasized the *quality* of interactions, not just the *quantity* of interactions. Though their definitions were about friendship broadly, prior studies specifically about nondisabled students' attitudes toward peers with I/DD found that higher quality of contact (e.g., freely chosen, enjoyable) was associated with positive attitudes while higher quantity of contact (e.g., superficial or required) had no effect or a negative impact (McManus et al., 2010; Schwab, 2017). Similarly, ICT points to optimal conditions for positive outcomes including not just regular, frequent contact but also quality components such as equal status and meaningful interaction (Allport, 1954).

Participants in middle and high school referred to trust/loyalty and social bonds in their definitions, again reflecting a behavioral component with a resultant affective response. Participants described that being yourself was important in middle school to truly get to know and feel comfortable with each other as friends. The high school participants distinguished between acquaintances and friends, specifically noting the affordances of friendship in allowing shared humor and informality compared to the formalities and politeness of acquaintances. In this sense, participants described being able to act the way they wanted to without upsetting their friend. Both definitions emphasized the importance of authenticity (e.g., being yourself, acting the way you want) to participants in the context of friendship. This reflects prior research showing that adolescents who felt more authentic in their friendships had higher self-esteem, less loneliness, and more satisfaction with their friendship (Peets & Hodges, 2018). According to ICT, positive outcomes are more likely when the contact involves informal and meaningful personal interactions during which members of the two groups can truly get to know one another and develop deeper social connections (Allport, 1954). Indeed, in a national study of middle school students' perceptions of inclusion of students with ID, contact appeared to be effective

only if it included opportunities to affect nondisabled students' perceptions of the capabilities of students with ID (Siperstein et al., 2007). Contact alone did not result in positive changes, and some contact reinforced negative perceptions of students with ID. Additionally, in a study of middle school boys' attitudes about social relationships with peers with disabilities, contact alone did not result in positive interactions or friendship development because nondisabled students remained reluctant to interact with peers with disabilities due to perceived differences in interests and abilities, perceived threats to their own social status, and lack of understanding of communication differences (Kalymon et al., 2010).

Building on the importance of authenticity to the participants, the finding that stood out as possibly the most critical to friendship development between students with and without I/DD related to participants' negative perceptions of the capabilities of students with I/DD and their resultant lack of comfort interacting with them. Participants described an overall anxiety related to social interactions with peers with I/DD that, according to ICT, perpetuated rather than reduced misunderstanding and prejudice (i.e., ableism). The social interactions, which consisted predominantly of short greetings and unilateral helping, were depicted by participants as superficial, formal, strained, and inauthentic. The middle and high school students admitted that they felt shy and intimidated when faced with what they viewed as the daunting task of interacting with a peer with I/DD. Their lack of comfort with peers with I/DD led to interactions the participants described as "just being nice" or "helping them," which are presumably not as meaningful or enjoyable as interactions with their other friends (without I/DD). The result was a social context in which secondary students with and without I/DD did not appear to have equal status, nor opportunities for regular *and* meaningful contact, the key components ICT emphasizes for reduction of misunderstanding and prejudice, and in this case, the potential for

friendship development. Participants also highlighted the barrier of being in different places during the school day, which contributed to the perpetuation of this social dynamic of inauthentic and hierarchical interactions. Prior studies have also indicated negative social consequences regarding friendship development due to the lack of inclusive education (Han & Chadsey, 2004; Siperstein et al., 2007). Ultimately, this dynamic reflects the nature of ableism being a barrier to inclusive education, and the lack of inclusive education perpetuating ableism (Hehir, 2002).

The perceptions of secondary students were contrasted by those of elementary students who appeared to be at least neutral, if not optimistic about the potential for friendship with peers with I/DD. With more inclusive education in elementary schools (Kitmitto, 2011), participants likely spent more time with classmates with I/DD and may view interacting with classmates with I/DD as common and thus feel more comfortable and confident doing so. Inherent to experiencing more classroom time together, they may observe a wider range of unexpected behaviors, which was reflective of the comments regarding certain behaviors seeming humorous. These perceptions point to a need for adult involvement to teach about disability and to explain the context around certain behaviors. In fact, participants emphasized adult involvement as a core strategy to facilitate social opportunities. Extant research also supports the importance of adult facilitation for friendship development between students with and without I/DD (Author, 2011; 2018; Matheson et al. 2007; Shogren et al., 2015).

Participant descriptions of their activities with friends seemed relatively straightforward. The younger participants emphasized engaging in physical activities together (e.g., sports, games, outdoor activities), while the older participants also described hanging out and talking. This developmental difference in types of activities largely confirms extant literature (Matheson et al., 2007; Selman, 1980). Notably, participants described social activities that students with

I/DD would be able to engage in with appropriate supports. These findings suggest opportunities for intervention regarding social context in that students with I/DD should be invited by their peers to these activities or just be present when these social decisions and invitations are made.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As in all studies, there are limitations to be considered and addressed in future research. This was not a representative sample as participants were from a predominantly White school district, and we did not report on the specific demographics of our sample including their prior experiences with peers with disabilities. Due to limited time with the students, I decided to conduct the focus groups without first collecting demographic information. Additionally, I did not track responses to specific participants. Future studies should include a racially and ethnically diverse sample and report on those demographics. Moreover, some students were purposefully selected by educators due to their involvement as social leaders or their prior involvement with students with I/DD. This may have resulted in biased findings that were more welcoming of students with I/DD than the general student population. However, the thematic findings were largely consistent across all participants, thus I felt the findings were representative. In fact, the findings were not very positive about the promise of friendships between students with and without I/DD. Lastly, and reflective of the reciprocity and mutuality in authentic friendships between students with and without I/DD, future studies should examine perspectives of students with I/DD on social opportunities in inclusive settings and friendship development with their disabled and nondisabled peers. Additionally, observations of students with and without I/DD interacting in inclusive settings could help with data triangulation in interview studies and provide more information about the social context.

### **Implications**

Despite these limitations, the findings add to our understanding of friendship between students with and without I/DD. Intervention to address the challenge of friendship between students with and without I/DD should begin with the understanding that friendships result from and reflect *horizontal* relationships (i.e., reciprocal; equitable social power or capital), not *vertical* relationships (i.e., hierarchical; with individuals with greater social power or capital; Bagwell & Schmidt, 2011). As the participants' responses indicated, a pattern of vertical relationships can perpetuate inequities and deficit views of students with I/DD by nondisabled peers, which can result in persistent barriers to friendship (Finke, 2016). Addressing the *social context* for friendship development rather than focusing predominantly on the social skills of students with I/DD accounts for both members in a friendship dyad and can promote horizontal relationships to overcome these barriers. Moreover, not all students with I/DD will demonstrate (i.e., perform on demand) specific social skills, yet they can and should still have friends. Thinking beyond social skills to the social context for friendship is like organizing the social ecology of the classroom and focusing on classroom social dynamics (Farmer et al., 2018). This means closely observing both the quantity and quality of social contact of students with and without IDD and looking to improve each (Author, 2017). Both special and general education teachers should consider this part of their roles in the context of inclusive education.

An effective starting point for addressing the lack of friendships is to increase inclusive education, especially in secondary settings where there tends to be less inclusive education than elementary settings, so students with and without I/DD experience natural social opportunities that can result in authentic interactions rather than the limited social opportunities and inauthentic interactions participants described. Again, ICT emphasizes that the key components for reducing misunderstanding or prejudice are equal status among groups, repeated interactions

over time, and meaningful personal interactions, which ideally lead to reduction of anxiety about interacting with the other group. Inclusive education does not automatically result in friendship development, but being together more of the time at school allows students with and without IDD to learn from each other, get to know each other, and possibly build friendships (Author, 2014; Shogren et al., 2015). Indeed, social contacts and socially significant social contacts of students with I/DD were higher in inclusive compared to segregated classrooms (Jameson et al., 2022). To achieve social outcomes of inclusive education such as authentic interactions and friendships, nondisabled peers need to better understand their classmates with I/DD and develop positive perceptions of friendships with them (de Boer et al., 2012). Peer network interventions (a type of peer-mediated intervention often implemented in secondary settings) address environmental factors impacting peer social interactions (i.e., the social context) and adhere to a strengths-based approach towards students with I/DD, emphasizing equal status roles and reciprocal and mutual relationships (Biggs & Robison, 2022). At a broad level, emphasizing inclusive education also inherently means addressing systemic ableism in schools (Hehir, 2002) through anti-ableist curricula and emphasizing disability in all diversity and equity efforts (Lalvani & Bacon, 2019). In elementary settings that tend to be more inclusive, teachers should address (e.g., explain) unexpected behaviors so nondisabled students are not confused, scared, or wanting to laugh at students with I/DD. Ultimately, students with I/DD need to be socially available *and* viewed as socially viable by their nondisabled peers. Reflective of the importance of authenticity to the participants, friendship development may be more likely if students with and without I/DD could interact reciprocally as peers and possibly argue (and make up) or tease each other rather than just helping or being nice to each other.

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PERSPECTIVES ON FRIENDSHIP

Table 1.

Definitions of Friendship- Code Representativeness\* and Data Exemplars

Friendship component	Sample (N = 44)	Data Exemplar
Kindness	28 (63.64%)	You look for, um, kindness, a great friend, and a really good person (El.). Friends aren't the ones who are supposed to put you down all the time (HS).
Trust/Loyalty	26 (59.1%)	Your friend won't say things behind your back, but if someone's not your friend they might say some things behind your back (El.). A friend is someone you can tell your secrets to or something that's really troubling (HS).
Help/Support	13 (29.55%)	When they're your friend they will, like, if you're upset, they'll, um, like, help you or comfort you (El.). Someone that can help you make, like, good choices, and, like, keep you away from doing bad stuff (MS).
Companionship/ Connection	13 (29.55%)	Maybe hanging out with them a lot, like maybe having playdates a lot and hanging out (El.). Someone who's kind of a second family, like a sibling, in a way (MS).
Acceptance	10 (22.73%)	You don't just look at how they look or if they have a disability or something, you look for, um, kindness, a great friend, and a really good person (El.). I'm friends with people who either have ideals that slightly cross with mine or go along with mine. (MS).
Fun/Humor	8 (18.18%)	I like being able to make a new friend and getting to know them and play with them. And, making up handshakes, and having fun together (El.). If you're really close with someone, sometimes you'll tease 'em and, you know, joke around with 'em, and they'll kinda just, you know, understand. (HS)

Note: \*Code representativeness refers to the number of participants with at least one use of that code. El.= Elementary student; HS= High school student; MS= Middle school student

## PERSPECTIVES ON FRIENDSHIP