

**University of Alberta**

**Friendships in Dyadic Relationships Between a Young Adult  
With a Developmental Disability and a Nondisabled Peer**

by

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## **Abstract**

This study focused on the nature of friendship in each of two dyadic relationships between a young adult with a developmental disability and a nondisabled peer. Students with developmental disabilities who are included in university and college classes will meet nondisabled peers as inclusive education becomes more prevalent at the postsecondary level. The basic interpretive interviews captured on video helped to explore the nature of their friendships. Included were third-party informants, a parent and a professor, who illuminated the important themes that emerged during the research.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

### **Friendship**

Friendship is a treasured aspect of our experience of being human. Friendship for anyone is a place of refuge and understanding. It is a place where we go when we require time away from the onslaught of daily life and the sufferings that we all endure from time to time that need to be sorted out and discussed. In that place of being, or through that portal, much laughter, joy, and strength gather.

A friend is all that and much more, which is in no way easily described or defined. It is altogether a human thing to bond with someone, to want to share with another and to be together with that person in ongoing active and wonderful encounters. When one considers what life would be without friendship, it would be something we could not endure.

### **My Journey**

I developed inclusive educational tools for educators, parents and administrators in the nineties. Those tools were developed to support teachers in the regular classroom as they welcomed students with disabilities. I also developed a podcast that features an interview with my son Alex who has a developmental disability and his friend Jollean. Without Alex, this journey I have been on would not have been possible. His life has given me so much, and least of all a front row seat in understanding inclusive education. I have also developed strength, determination, and courage, beyond what I could have imagined.



As we have lived in the community around the university we are grateful for all the people who know us, care for us, and watch out for us. This is a busy and vibrant community and one that is creative. In our way we have been a part of the mix and I believe that we have made contributions to our community. The decision to continue to examine the nature of friendship was a natural next step in the process.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature and experience of a friendship between a young person who has a developmental disability and someone in his or her peer group who does not have a disability and to describe what the friendship is like for the person with a disability, as well as for person who is non-disabled. I explore two dyadic relationships, the rewards and shortcomings of the relationship, and the reciprocity of the shared feelings. Within the pairs of friendships that are featured within this study, the participants that have disabilities are developmental disabilities in nature. One of the participants has an intellectual impairment, and the other participant's mobility is affected. Defined, a developmental disability affects over the life span, intellectual and/or a physical ability to function. People who have a developmental disability have problems with life activities such as language, mobility, learning, self-help, and independent living.

The following questions are explored. What is friendship? How did the friends meet? What do they do together? How long have they been friends? What do they think is important about friendship? Are the friendships satisfying for

both partners? Are these relationships similar to others between two individuals without disabilities, or does the disability of one partner necessarily make the relationship unique?

It is difficult to find a definition that encompasses all of what friendship can be, but perhaps it can be described as a “social relationship between two people that is reciprocal, rewarding, and fun for both parties (see Barber & Hupp, 1993). Friendship is characterized by multiple voluntary contacts and shared experiences across weeks, months, or years” (Hendrickson, Shokoohi-Yekta, Hamre-Nietupski & Gable, 1996, p. 4). Furthermore, as Wolfensberger (2000) found:

Social associations can strongly convey role messages. There are innumerable folk sayings about how one is defined by the company one keeps. More specifically, when persons with the same impairment are juxtaposed to each other, the idea that all such people “belong together” is conveyed to, or reinforced in, observers. (p. 1)

### **Friendship: Inclusive Education**

Over the past couple of decades, increasing numbers of students with developmental disabilities have been educated in regular classrooms. This trend toward inclusive education provides more opportunities for friendships between students with and without disabilities:

So what is inclusion or inclusive education? First, it is an attitude—a value and belief system—not an action or set of actions. Once adopted by a school or school district, it should drive all decisions and actions by those who have adopted it. The word included implies being a part of something, being embraced into the whole. (Villa & Thousand, 1995, p. 6)

There are many definitions of *inclusion*, but as early as preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school, students will enter increasingly inclusive

and diverse classrooms. Academics are only one part of what school offers students; within the community of the school they will also gain important skills in socialization as they learn how to be a part of the world as it unfolds. Peer modeling is a powerful learning tool for all students. It is even more important for students with disabilities to be immersed in social contexts where they will gain important life tools. Inclusive school experiences prepare students with disabilities for adult life as a member of the community. Segregated school experiences can only prepare students with disabilities for segregation in adult life.

The regular school experience offers persons with developmental disabilities the opportunity to meet others who are not disabled and to form friendships with them. Friendships are important for the well-being of individuals who have a disability and, if others embrace them, may also offer security at a later time in their community. This security may take many forms, for example, employment opportunities, formal and informal recreational activities, and adult friendships. Furthermore, when good friends surround a person, he or she lives a fuller and richer life.

According to Alberta Learning (2004), "Inclusive setting/inclusion means specially designed instruction and support for students with special education needs in regular classrooms and neighborhood schools" (p. 3). Friendship on a deeper level gives us much more than a learning experience: It has far-reaching implications for all students, beyond what is taught in the classroom. The friends that students make early in life are important connections because they may offer

the person with a developmental disability protection in some measure or buffer the onslaught of marginalization and isolation. Perhaps most important, however, friendship empowers all of us and gives us a sense of belonging. We gain strength and courage, happiness and joy from being with our friends.

### **Proximity**

Falvey, Forest, Pearpoint, and Rosenberg (2002) noted:

one of the key characteristics of building connections and friendships is being in close proximity to people and having frequent opportunities to interact with each other (Asher, Odem & Gottman, 1977; Hartup, 1975; Howes, 1983; Lewis & Rosenblum, 1975) . . . . Research has demonstrated that in order for children and adults to form the necessary bonds for friendships they must have frequent access to one another. This access is facilitated when students are in close proximity to one another on a regular basis. So, it follows that students who attend the same schools as others who live in their neighborhood are more likely to form bonds that are strong enough to result in friendship. (Grenot-Scheyer, Coots & Falvey 1989). (p. 29).

As students with developmental disabilities continue to be included within regular classrooms, they require support as they endeavor to develop friendships with their peers who do not have disabilities. This is also true of students who do not have disabilities. “As classrooms become increasingly diverse, new strategies are being developed to ensure that students with disabilities are more than simply present” (Kunc & Van der Klift, 2002, p. 21). These strategies include several tools that have been developed “to facilitate such connections and eventual friendships,” such as “Circle of Friends, Making Action Plans (MAPS), and Planning Alternative Tomorrows with HOPE (PATH)” (Falvey et al., 2002, p. 30). It is important to note that these tools provide support for inclusion, but the

foundation for them is based upon being people centered and the development of friendships and forming as many varieties of relationships as possible.

### **Overview of the Problem**

Relationships allow us to grow and develop, and without them, students with developmental disabilities are at risk. It may be difficult for students with developmental disabilities to reach out to others, and, similarly, it may also be difficult for their peers without disabilities to reach out to them. As one high school senior stated, “I have the right to experience human diversity in my school” (Fisher, 1999, p. 62). Peers without disabilities must recognize that their peers with disabilities are individuals with similar needs and desires, and the importance of forming relationships with them cannot be underestimated. Still, many educators do not see the value of educating persons with developmental disabilities within a regular education environment, although a growing body of research has shown evidence of the gains that these students make both academically and socially. Moreover, students who do not have developmental disabilities also reap the rewards of the influx of students with developmental disabilities into the regular education system. Also, Tapasak and Walther-Thomas (1999) noted that there were increases for students with disabilities in social and in self-perceptions of cognitive competence for both students with and without disabilities, but specifically students with disabilities had “increased rates” of and “higher perceptions” of their competencies (p. 221). Additionally, students reported when talking about their friendship with a student with severe disabilities that “between 55% and 65% of the respondents also indicated that they

themselves would benefit from these friendships (e.g., “I would feel good about myself” and “It could be fun.” “We might have common interests and I could learn about disabilities”) (Hendrickson et al., 1996).

### **Significance of the Study**

Further investigation is required as we begin to understand the nature of young adults who have developmental disabilities and their friendships with nondisabled peers. Research must seek an understanding of the nature of friendships and the experience of the people involved in them. It is also important that current research support the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities within the regular education system. Strategies are available to create friendships and bonds amongst students, but isolation may continue to be a factor in the lives of students with developmental disabilities and may also occur in inclusive situations if the development of friendships with nondisabled peers is not supported. Studies that report difficulties in friendships between the two groups or the inability to form friendships, have cited various reasons that students “mainstream peers were often reported as kind but that an ‘equal’ friendship appeared difficult to develop because interests and abilities did not match” (Cuckle & Wilson, 2002, p.68). Also, as “the young people became older they found it difficult to sustain mainstream friendships; their mainstream peers wanted more independence that was usually allowed to the more vulnerable, apparently less mature young people” (p.68). It is important to examine examples of dyadic relationships comprised of students with a developmental disability and peers without disabilities to overcome the belief that these students do not belong

together or cannot form meaningful relationships with one another. It may well be, however, that students are not given the opportunity to create friendships, that people who could support these friendships do not, and, consequently, that those young people continue to be marginalized within the population of the school or postsecondary educational setting. Studies on the nature of relationships are necessary to illuminate what is possible between diverse student populations when they have the opportunity. It seems that if relationships can be further understood and if students' value and embrace each other, then relationships may form more often. These relationships are fundamental to the empowerment of persons with developmental disabilities to foster their well-being and inclusion within mainstream society. The ongoing concern continues to be, for many, a life without friends and without being valued by others. Everything possible must be done to alleviate this burden for the most vulnerable members of our population.

The central exploration of this thesis is to examine friendships between individuals with and without disabilities by the use of a basic interpretive video interview. Through an audiovisual medium, I hope to be able to understand more about the friendships, as video footage may convey relevant information through observing interactions within the dynamic of the friendships, and through basic interview questions.

Communication may also be a concern for the people who are being interviewed, as the person may not easily articulate his or her views. To find alternative communication means is a way to understand more that may not be revealed through a basic interpretive interview. It is through seeing people

interact, what people do and how people are together that is telling about the relationship. Through observation we may come to understand more. Visuals can be a powerful medium, where we can see and glean for ourselves some of the essential aspects of the relationship. This window may reveal what is important within the relationship.

Chapter 2 reviews the relevant literature on educational inclusion and friendships between individuals with and without developmental disabilities. Whereas Chapter 3 describes the methods employed in this study. Found within Chapter 4 are the results of the study, and finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion and conclusions.



## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter I discuss friendship and the development of friendships among the general population of young people and young adults. This provides a foundation and context for an understanding of the nature of friendships within dyads of young adults with developmental disabilities and their nondisabled peers. How do social and communication skills play an integral role in friendship? In postsecondary inclusive school environments such as colleges and universities, proximity is a key foundation for friendships to flourish, and with proper supports and natural development, casual relationships may develop into friendships. Finally, I explain how basic interpretive video interviews and stimulated recall have supported this research process.

### **Friendship and Developmental Phases**

Friendships have common denominators across diverse populations, and early development and attachments play a role in the outcome of interpersonal relationships later in life. According to Hartup (1989):

Recent studies have suggested that a child's effectiveness in dealing with the social world emerges largely from experience in close relationships. In these contexts language emerges; so does a repertoire for coordinating one's actions with those of others, one's knowledge of oneself, and much of one's knowledge about the world. Relationships may affect these acquisitions because the child spends so much time with significant others. In addition, the transactions a child has within close relationships may also have special significance. (p. 120)

Furthermore, "The evidence suggests that friends are 'developmental advantages' in socioemotional development" (p. 126). Hartup (1992) suggested that social

competence is created largely by interactions that are both vertical and horizontal in nature. Santrock (2008) noted that, “increasingly, researchers are finding that friendship plays an important role in development throughout the human life span (Dow & Wood, 2006; Monsour, 2006; Pruchno & Rosenbaum, 2003)” (p. 500).

Young people’s social and cognitive abilities may be affected by relationships that impact them early in life, and they may have an established foundation for future, secure relationships and positive developmental and emotional outcomes. Essential elements of friendship take on the characteristics of “reciprocity . . . and commitment . . . [between individuals who] see themselves more or less as equals” (Hartup, 1992, p. 1). The attributes and definitions of friendship are variable, but reciprocity, commitment, caring, support, and fun are some of the recurring and defining aspects of friendship.

Brown and Klute (2005) examined a succession of studies conducted over a period of 30 years and identified the following general truths about adolescent friendship: “Equality and reciprocity are considered normative mandates” in friendship; individuals most likely to be selected as “friends are peers who are similar to the self”; adolescents are likely to select “same-gender peers as close friends; and in multiethnic environments there is also a strong preference for same-race peers”; and “girls display more intimacy in their friendship than boys, at least in the frequency if not the depth of intimate interactions” (General Truths section, ¶ 1).

during college, students usually develop intimate relationships and make major decisions such as choosing an occupation. [Also,] . . . college environments vary in the extent to which they provide support services and address the practical constraints [for persons who have physical

challenges] these students face (Borland & James, 1999). (Montgomery & Côté, 2005, Fostering section, ¶ 3).

Santrock (2008) offered insight into the phase of young adulthood: “Juggling the competing demands of intimacy, identity and independence also becomes a central task of adulthood” (p. 499). Young adulthood is a demanding period because young people face these challenges simultaneously as they continue to develop, and one important aspect of friendship is that it offers shelter from the slings and arrows of difficult challenges.

### **Growing Away From Family**

We build upon our experiences in our immediate family, and attachment and social learning theories play a role in our development and our future relationships. The need to step away from family in general becomes greater by late adolescence and early adulthood. For some, that desire may come earlier, and for others, later. For many, it requires a balance between family, peer relationships, and schoolwork.

This need for balance can be the same for many young persons who have disabilities. Many do not rely on family, use the public transportation system, and live and work independently as much as possible. For many, finding ways to meet others in their age group is difficult. Although we have made some strides, more work must be done to facilitate those relationships. Their reliance on others for transportation may limit their getting together with friends (Cuckle & Wilson, 2002). There must be alternate and creative ways to enable young people with disabilities to gain further independence from families and develop their own lives. Generally speaking, other transportation systems specifically designed for

intellectually and physically challenged persons enable individuals to be independent and not have to travel on public buses. With independent transportation, young people with disabilities may be also be more accepted by their peers. Young adults without disabilities may have their own vehicles and offer rides to their friends and family members too, may also provide transportation. The logistical needs of people with disabilities, however, do not preclude their very human need for relationships in their lives.

Development in early adulthood, according to Santrock (2008), often involves balancing intimacy and commitment on the one hand and independence and freedom on the other. At the same time that individuals are trying to establish an identity, they face the difficulty of having to cope with increasing their independence from parents, possibly developing a romantic relationship, and increasing their friendship commitments. Part of facing the task of becoming more independent involves “being able to think for themselves and doing things on their own without having to rely on others” (p. 500).

Various factors and misperceptions may result in the belief that persons with disabilities cannot form friendships with nondisabled peers, and, therefore, friendships such as the dyads in this study are not encouraged:

Somewhat paradoxically, researchers have paid scant attention to the friendships of older students and young adults with disabilities (Barber & Hupp, 1993; Gaylord-Ross & Haring, 1987). Relatively little research has focused on preparing older students with the skills and social contacts necessary to develop friendships with their peers without disabilities (Hamre-Nietupski, 1993; Rynders et al., 1993) and transition to adult life. Conclusions about the friendships of older students almost exclusively have reflected the perceptions and values of adults (Forest, 1989; Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, Sasso, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1993; Lutfiyya, 1988; Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989; Strully &

Bartholomew-Lorimer, 1988; Strully & Strully, 1989); and students' social values, social networks, and socialization strategies infrequently were the dependent variable of study. With few exceptions (e.g., Murray-Seegert, 1989; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990), researchers have failed to examine how preadolescents and adolescents feel about forming friendships with peers with severe disabilities. (Hendrickson et al., 1996, p. 20)

Additionally, various reviewed studies have been published that speak to the loneliness and lack of friendships that students with disabilities may experience in the regular school system:

Accordingly, chronic feelings of loneliness in adolescents are associated with significant emotional/behavioral problems (e.g., clinical depressions, eating disorders, Inderbitzen-Pisaruk et al., 1992). Although loneliness has not been investigated systematically in students with severe mental, physical, or sensory disabilities preliminary evidence has suggested that middle and junior high school students with severe disabilities are similar to their counterparts without disabilities with regard to loneliness (Sabornie, Thomas, & Coffman, 1989) and associated social-emotional travails. (Hendrickson et al., 1996, p. 20)

Countless told and untold stories speak to the impact of isolation on people, and we cannot ignore them. In the extreme, the prevalence of increased violence in university and other school communities demonstrates the urgent need to connect people with one another. Educators must connect those who have developmental disabilities and may not have a voice to speak out for themselves with others who will develop relationships with them.

Friendships between peers require exploration as we continue to include persons with disabilities in mainstream society and to alter and raise their quality of life through educational, community-living, and employment initiatives. The literature has explored relationships between the two groups in secondary schools and the dyadic relationships between adolescents and adults with developmental

disabilities and nondisabled peers (Cutts & Sigafos, 2001; Fisher & Meyer, 2002; Haring & Breen, 1992; Hendrickson et al., 1996; Kennedy & Itkonen, 1994; Kennedy, Shukla, & Fryxell, 1997; Lutfiyya, 1991; Peck, Donaldson, & Pezzoli, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1989).

### **Social Skills and Communication**

Researchers have recently conducted further studies on friendships at the college and university level. Miller, Chen, Glover-Graf, and Kranz (2009) looked at the possibilities of friendships with persons with disabilities at the postsecondary level and found that the following factors can affect the development of these relationships:

A combination of factors that reside within the PWD [persons with disabilities], such as poor social skills (Howland & Rintala, 2001), low self-esteem, functional limitations, and communication problems (Rintala et al., 1997), may negatively affect their ability to form close, personal relationships. Environmental factors such as lack of adequate transportation or environmental accommodations may also hinder PWDs' opportunity to develop meaningful relationships. (p. 211)

Miller et al., found that individuals within certain categories of disabilities (i.e., mild and moderate) more readily develop relationships with acquaintances and friends; however, the limitations of the study were that the survey results cannot be generalized. Those surveyed were 91% Hispanic women, from a southwest US college, and not representative of a wider population group. Although Miller et al., cited poor social skills, lower self-esteem, functional limitations, and communication problems as factors that affect the development of friendships, people with disabilities, who face some or all of these challenges, have been able to form friendships.

Social skills and communication may be areas that need to be developed, and acquiring these skills may lead to the development of friendships. Other environmental factors that the above authors identified may also hinder the development of relationships. In their critical analysis of 26 empirical interventions, specifically with middle and secondary school students, Carter and Hughes (2005) reported the following findings:

A balanced intervention approach involves combining support and skill based components into comprehensive intervention packages. Although skill instruction has the potential to increase students' independence, probability of successful interaction, and social competence, no amount of instruction will increase interaction if peers are not in proximity or if interaction is actively discouraged within certain settings. Similarly, even when educational environments are arranged to maximize opportunities for peer interaction, interaction will remain less than optimal if students are not provided with skill instruction related to communicating with their peers. An exclusive focus on one component versus the other overlooks the important role that *both* social competence and environment factors have on peer relationships. (p. 191)

As Carter and Hughes stated, social-skill and communication remediation may improve peer interactions, and students may continue to develop these skills at the college and university level. However, other critical factors are involved that may include proximity, whether educators encourage and help to develop social contact, and how the relationships are maintained and supported over the long term. These friendships require work, as do all relationships.

People both with and without disabilities must be persistent and willing to continue the friendship, which depends on other commitments and time. Any relationship involves complexities, and developmental disabilities compound the already existing challenges that young adults with disabilities face as they endeavor to develop relationships with others. They require support.

To what extent communication limitations hamper friendship is difficult to measure. Friendships do not depend solely on social abilities and communication for their development and endurance, although if someone with or without a disability is pleasant and does not display overt, negative behaviors, others may view him or her more positively. “Measuring the extent to which a person is responding in a socially desirable manner is a critical factor in determining whether people are truly willing to consider having a relationship with a PWD [person with a disability]” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 215).

Miller et al., (2009) also found that students are willing to engage in friendship and have acquaintance-like relationships with people with disabilities, but less likely to be involved in marriage. Within a friendship, the social and communication limitations may be overlooked because the participants are willing to do so and accepting. Furthermore, a friend may also compensate for the other person’s challenge in a specific area. For example, a friend may be able to communicate in only a limited way, but within the friendship they may develop other forms of communication. In other ways, friends may be more active together, which may not depend on communication. They may also be willing not to emphasize challenges such as communication within the friendship.

One cannot necessarily assume an acquired level of competency before a person with a disability can form a friendship. A study which observed social interactions between peers with and without intellectual disabilities found: “Even though deficits in social competence is a defining characteristic of intellectual disability (see DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994), such deficits



did not seem to prevent these adolescents from positive social interactions with non-handicapped peers” (Cutts & Sigafoos, 2001, p. 140). However many and varied the steps may be to encourage someone to develop to the point of being socially adept and communicative, it can be argued that the most important factor is the opportunity to meet a friend. Such relationships can develop into lifelong friendships. If the friendship is with someone of the opposite sex, it can develop into marriage.

### **Proximity and Reported Benefits of an Inclusive Education**

Inclusive education at all educational levels not only creates a way for people to engage in academic learning, but also provides opportunities for friendships between persons with and without disabilities. At all levels of schooling, as environments become more academic in nature, it may be that friendships and the ability to meet others are not as common as in the earlier grades because the structure of the school day is different and may limit ongoing interactions. The same can likely be said about the college and university environment. However, this is difficult to ascertain in the college and university-level educational environment because further research in this area is required. However, in, for example, secondary schools, when relationships and interactions do occur, the “substantial impact” (Carter & Hughes, 2005, p. 179) that peer relationships have is beneficial in many areas. Furthermore, as the authors stated, “Peer interactions impact many other areas, such as the refinement of social skills; accessing support systems, companionship; and the norms and values of the peer group” (p. 179). For example, proximity and the needed supports to develop

relationships play a critical role. Also, recognizing opportunities to develop and build upon natural bonds between people can cause friendships to flourish.

Students who are familiar with and positive about inclusive environments emphasize the integration of students into “normal places and opportunities” (Fisher, Pumpian, & Sax, 1999, p. 276). In a secondary school one student suggested that students with disabilities “need the chance to see the world the way we see it and get the same education as we do, if they themselves are comfortable with the idea of doing it” (p. 277). A student without a disability added, “It makes them feel better about themselves and they get to know more people” (p. 277). Additionally, inclusion prepares students for the future and helps them to develop contacts that they might have for the rest of their lives. This contact is not one sided; both people with disabilities and people without disabilities benefit from knowing one another.

Fisher (1999) reported additional positive effects of inclusive education of typical students’ beliefs: “improvements in self-concept, growth in social cognition, increased tolerance of others, reduced fear of human differences, development of personal principles, and interpersonal acceptance and friendships” (p. 459). Given the depth and quality of the documented attributes of inclusive education, the “implementation of inclusive educational practices in schools is an imperative” (p. 459).

Fisher (1999) explained that a lack of contact between people with disabilities and people without disabilities will lead to further segregation and discrimination. If contact with others different from ourselves is limited, we may

believe that they are unlike us. This distorted view of another person obstructs the real person from emerging: a person who has hopes and desires that are similar to our own. Also, as we continue to segregate people because of their disabilities, it becomes a more acceptable construct that requires less and less justification of our actions.

In a recent study Bunch and Valeo (2004) also examined peer attitudes from the elementary to the secondary level, and the

salient finding, in the area of friendships, is that in general, students in inclusive schools have friends with disabilities, whereas students from schools with special education structures do not. Difference in friendship is apparent from grade 5 through secondary levels . . . . What lies behind this fundamental difference? Student responses point to simple routine contact, in the case of the inclusive model between typical students and peers with disabilities, and lack or disruption of contact under the special education model. (pp. 72- 73)

Proximity, along with necessary supports in an inclusive school community, can help people from diverse groups to meet one another. It provides an opportunity to see who is on the journey with them and sort out difficulties together. To exclude individuals with developmental and various other disabilities from that journey leaves a number of people out of the discussion of what our world is and should be. For many years now students with various disabilities have been included in regular classrooms and have successfully graduated, and on their journey they have developed many friends along the way.

### **Noninclusive Education**

It is notable that many schools at all levels may call themselves inclusive, but they may not be truly inclusive if they do not offer ways for individuals with

disabilities to meet other people without disabilities and form friendships with them. Schools also segregate students, but call themselves inclusive. Although there may be students with disabilities in the school, they are not in regular classes and may remain in another part of the school distinct and separate from the rest of the student population. They are not usually seen interacting with their fellow students. Also, students with disabilities who may be included in art, physical education, and drama and attend only those nonacademic classes and may not be included in regular academic classes. Students with disabilities may attend classes for part of the day and then return to their segregated classroom. At the university and college level of education, students with disabilities will usually be included in the classes that they choose.

Inclusion is the willingness to take action for all students and include persons with disabilities in regular, nonsegregated classes with the supports they need. This is also a place of academic learning for all, of acceptance, caring, and belonging. As we endeavor to dialogue with others to build peaceful and inclusive communities, we may also wish to consider educational equity amongst a diverse population. While educational excellence is meeting academic standards, we also need to consider those who also have worthwhile merit in the contributions that they make, other than academic excellence.

### **College and University Postsecondary Strategies**

Hamill (2003) reported that a student, Megan, a young woman (26 years old) who has Down syndrome and was enrolled in a college, talked about her interactions and friendships. He stated that “one of the major reasons for going to

college was her desire to have friends” (p. 7). Throughout her inclusion in college, two study buddies supported her; they both felt that they had developed a friendship with her, and there were other “noticed examples of friendship” (p. 7) that developed. She was also involved with Natural Ties, a student organization that seeks to bring persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities together to provide social connections and natural supports. Although these relationships developed, Megan “frequently said that she felt lonely. This is somewhat inconsistent with the findings reported in other studies (Hall et al., 2000; Page & Chadsey-Rusch, 1995)” (p. 347). However, Megan also advocated on behalf of herself by writing a letter to one of the officers of the student clubs on campus. She wanted a chance to become involved in interactions outside the classroom, which she did.

The college level in the United States also has a Best Buddies Program, and Hardman and Clark (2006) reported that everyone benefits from participation. Founded in 1989 by Anthony Shriver, Best Buddies has friendship programs in 1400 postsecondary, high, and middle schools. It has now spread to 42 countries worldwide and six continents. It was founded in Canada in 1993 and has positively impacted the people who are disabled and nondisabled in the friendship. Canada is number two in the world in terms of participation in the program. As a person without a disability who participated in the program said, the members “support people with intellectual disabilities living in their neighborhood” and are more aware of the abilities of these individuals to “hold a job in a community setting” (p. 60); furthermore, 77% were positive about their

children attending classes with someone with an intellectual disability (p. 60). The buddy activities include going to a movie, eating out, going to a sports event, and staying at home to watch a video.

Other supports have been used to develop friendships at the college and university educational level. The following initiative was developed over two decades ago. Postsecondary inclusive coordinators act as liaisons as friendships naturally develop. For example, if a natural friendship is evident between two people, postsecondary coordinators who work in the university or college environment can help to bring people together in activities outside the classroom. Suzanne Frank, who works in an educational environment at a university, stated:

I have seen relationships develop many, many, many times. It is doable and so impacting on the individuals involved in the relationships. I can't begin to describe the feelings that are felt by both individuals that are in that relationship. It is incredible and it may be something that would not be possible without some facilitation and support. It is doable, it is possible, and I encourage anyone who is interested in helping this process to please get involved. (Sutherland, 2004 [podcast])

Inherent in classes are natural peer supports, including university and college volunteers from the student body, which can lead to naturally occurring friendships. Peer supports can best help individuals with disabilities, although they too may require support from time to time. Group work is an excellent way to bring people with disparate abilities together. Professors can also model their acceptance of people with disabilities and highlight their contributions. In the university and college environment there is a need to develop friendships and offer students a way to support those friendships. Initiatives of various kinds can

be developed, and those that have proven to be beneficial also help to develop empathetic understanding on the part of nondisabled peers.

For supporters of inclusive education, an advantage of friendships between persons with disabilities and persons without disabilities is that they can create a social network within the community of school and in society after graduation. This network may lead to employment for generally underemployed persons with disabilities. The benefits of friendships are countless. The advantage of friendships is that they are not one sided because nondisabled peers can develop the attributes of caring, compassion, and empathy for others who are more vulnerable. These attributes, as well as social justice, according to Van der Klift and Kunc (2002), should be taught and encouraged at all levels of education because they are relevant. However, educators must value those attributes themselves to be the role models that students require and foster positive social interactions. Students who truly understand the benefits of diversity will have a positive effect on the world around them. Friendship fosters an understanding of these values on a deeper level, the contributive aspects of persons with disabilities, and the value of their contributions to the world.

### **Social Context**

Inclusion and inclusive education have the potential to continue on past college and university life for students with and without disabilities. A natural inevitability after graduation is the workplace, for students with and without disabilities. Families and advocates continue to work hard to open wide the doors for persons with disabilities in the area of employment after postsecondary. Social

context is important as persons with disabilities are further included in many areas of society. In a recent study Hergenrather and Rhodes (2007) explored undergraduate students' attitudes toward persons with disabilities and found that acceptance is generally more positive in the workplace than in the other contexts that they examined—dating and marriage. Gender is also important with regard to attitudes, as is the level of closeness and intimacy within the relationship. However, the dating subscale, which Hergenrather and Rhodes described as having friendship content, was limited in its scope.

Undergraduate students of both genders reported positive attitudes toward persons with disabilities across social contexts, which may suggest that undergraduate students perceive individuals with disabilities similar to persons without disabilities. Statistically significant differences were identified with gender. Female students reported a more positive attitude than male students. This is consistent with the findings of Gordon et al., (1990). (p. 72)

### **Friendships in Dyads**

When Taylor and Bogdan (1989) studied attitudes toward individuals with disabilities within dyadic friendships, they described a sociology of acceptance in which, although there is an awareness of the disability within the relationship, there is no stigma attached to it, nor is there a moral discrediting of the person's character because of the disability; rather, the relationship consists of two people who care about each other. The stigma ascribed to people with mental disabilities is found within the pathology of our society that excludes them based on social constructs and labeling. For too long this has been an expedient method of prohibiting persons with developmental disabilities from entering mainstream life and leading them down the inevitable path where no real and empowering



educational and employment opportunities await them. Consequently, they will continue to battle economic realities and systematic exclusion daily in a world where they cannot fight for themselves:

Since the 1960s the social sciences—specifically sociology and anthropology—have had a profound impact on the fields of mental health and mental retardation. From a sociological and anthropological perspective, mental retardation and mental illness are a social and cultural phenomenon. (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989, p. 2)

Taylor and Bogdan (1989) found that the relationships that they studied between persons with mental challenges and nondisabled peers were strong and real and endured. They described “four sentiments expressed by typical people who form relationships: . . . family, religious commitment, humanitarian sentiments and feelings of friendship” (p. 1). In their qualitative research they described in depth the people who are involved in relationships and the nature of these relationships. The researchers also asked their participants to describe their relationship with someone who has a developmental disability, and these people were taken aback because they did not view the relationship as something extraordinary that they would describe.

Taylor and Bogdan then asked the question, In spite of all that society has done to exclude and revile persons with disabilities, why do these relationships exist? The most obvious answer is that individuals with disabilities defy the ongoing systemic prejudice and personal discrimination that they face every day of their lives and connect with others. Conversely, individuals without disabilities also defy these systemic challenges and are engaged in friendships. Social networks and alliances that are built between people hamper these prejudices.

Through person to person interactions trust and security is built. It is also true that persons without disabilities also choose to be in the relationship despite the various hurdles that they too face. Furthermore, it should be noted that Taylor and Bogdan's findings revealed that the relationships are not one sided but, in fact, are very much a mutual and rewarding experience for everyone involved.

In Lutfiyya's (1991) study of adults in dyadic relationships, that involved individuals with learning difficulties, "The informants shared similar ideas and expectations about the characteristics of friendships. These included its mutual, exclusive, and voluntary nature; the rights, obligations, and responsibilities of friends to each other; and positive regard or affection between the friends" (p.233). One question that arises is, Does reciprocity occur in relationships between a person with a developmental disability and a nondisabled peer who are in the regular schools and regular classrooms and in life outside school? Reciprocity implies equality between people, and Lutfiyya found an exchange and equality between people who were happy to be in the relationship. Lutfiyya reported:

It was once held that the people most likely to be friends with individuals with learning difficulties are others with the same impairments. Whether this is consciously stated or not, many researchers believe it to be true, and then examine only this type of relationship. (p. 234)

The assumption that only people with like impairments will connect with one another and not form friendships with others seems to be an obvious prejudice, and perhaps it may have to be disproved time and again before the prejudice is eliminated and friendships can develop without other people and systems inhibiting them. It is an obstruction of the fundamental right of persons

with developmental disabilities to be denied friendships because others cannot see the advantage of those friendships or feel that they cannot be for whatever reason. The time and effort is required to build personal friendships. Perhaps violations of this nature should be treated as denial of the basic human rights of the persons involved. Over time we have made some strides and gained momentum as we endeavor to improve the lives of persons with developmental disabilities; however, more work is required. Lutfiyya (1990) said that in the staff/client role it may be more difficult to build friendships, and that the roles in two of her informants' cases were transcended in order for their friendship to begin.

### **How Video Supports This Process**

The role of the medium, videotapes and the interpretive video interview, was designed as a method to ensure optimum communication as the nature of friendship is discussed. Another aspect of videotapes is to show pairs of friends together, as another layer of understanding. Through seeing friends, we may understand more. Furthermore, the multi-layered aspect that the method conveys describes the friendships and provides understanding through two forms of communication. These two forms, both the audio and visual, enrich our understanding of the proposed research.

Additionally, the stimulated recall method is also used to ask the participants if they are satisfied with their responses, to clarify what they said if necessary, and to ensure understanding between the researcher and the participants. Research, using a stimulated recall method is being used in educational research and professional development of teachers (Meijer, Beijaard

& Verloop, 2002; as cited in Retiano, 2005) Stimulated recall, offers understanding of one's practices within teaching pedagogy. For teachers to understand their teaching methods seeing themselves within a specific context such as the classroom is important and valuable. Within this context, to view oneself in the basic interpretive video interviews may provide the participant with additional time to reflect upon their basic interpretive video interview, and then to reveal to the researcher another layer of understanding. As participants review their video taped interviews, in stimulated recall method, they may comment upon their interview questions and reflect upon their answers. They may also add anything relevant they want the researcher to know about their friendship. Limitations of the stimulated recall method, as Reitano (2005) said, it can be difficult to look at oneself and assess objectively one's responses. Reflection time, may give the individual time to consider what is important to add or clarify for the researcher.

The videotapes may provide the researcher with further understanding of these friendships within a dyadic context. They may also provide educators and the general viewer, for example, with a perspective of friendship as well as an understanding of the possibilities that exist in friendships between someone with a developmental disability and nondisabled peer. Through these videotapes, and the basic interpretive video interview, one hopes that there is further understanding, and development of friendships.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the methodological approach for this study. I used qualitative, basic interpretive interviews in conjunction with video footage of young adult individuals with developmental disabilities and their nondisabled peers as they discussed their friendships. I conducted two 30-60 minute dyadic on-camera interviews that gave the participants an opportunity to fully express their views; these video data will be part of my research dissemination. I then used stimulated recall, where the interviews are reviewed by the participants, to verify the data that has been collected. I also asked a teacher and a parent to offer their perspectives on selected segments of the visual data. Initially, I considered asking the participants to complete scrapbooks as part of the research process; however, none of them felt that this would reflect their friendships in a meaningful way. Therefore, I did not include scrapbooks in the research process.

In this chapter I discuss the philosophical basis for the methodological approach, selection of the participants, data collection, thematic analysis, internal validity, transferability, human factors, and ethical considerations.

### **Philosophical Basis for the Methodology**

#### ***The Interpretive Video Interview***

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) referred to the researcher as a *bricoleur*: “The interpretive *bricoleur* produces a *bricolage*—that is, a pieced-together set of representations that is fitted to the specifics of a complex situation” (p. 4). Flick (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) stated, “Qualitative research is inherently

multi method in focus” (p. 5). They added, “The combination of multiple methodological practices, empirical materials, perspectives, and observers in a single study is best understood, then, as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to any inquiry” (p. 5). Finally, according to Merriam (2002), “The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive. Word and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned about a phenomena” (p. 5). A basic interpretive interview allows the participants to make either simple and direct responses or, conversely, responses that are substantial in nature. Videotaping the interviews captured the participants’ views on their friendships. The use of videotapes is particularly noteworthy because they offered these students with disabilities an additional and alternate means to communicate and helped me to discover more about their relationships. As Eisner (1997) proposed, “Put another way, our capacity to wonder is stimulated by the possibilities the new forms of representation suggest” (p. 8). In this context, Sutherland (2004) conducted a dyadic interpretive interview on video.

A picture is worth a thousand words. Although this is a cliché, it may be that it enriches our understanding to gather and document dyadic relationships of persons with developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers. Through careful analysis we may come to understand more about the nature and underlying complexities of the representative friendships. In the analysis I examine the verbal aspects of the conversations with the informants as well as the nonverbal aspects, which together form substantive and illuminative research.

### ***Videotapes/Audiovisual Information***

Video is a noteworthy and accurate form of gathering visuals to process information on the basic interpretive interview as well as any gestures, body language, and display of nonverbal cues for deeper exploration of informants' interviews. This medium adds texture to research and helps us to further understand the participants as they express their views. There is also a special aspect of an audiovisual medium such as a video recording: It can be shared long after the initial interview while retaining the immediacy and impact of the initial recording. Accuracy and depth of information are also important aspects of videos with regard to visual information gathering. Audiovisual vignettes of relevant materials may be shared to understand and to create dialogue on the nature of friendship through podcasts and traditional methods of video viewing.

Audiovisual information gathering has an important function because the research, although informative, also documents the persons involved: not only their understanding and experience, but also their place in time. Alongside textual information that is prevalent in educational materials, there is an additional characteristic of video revealed in discovery and knowledge gathering. Hearing and seeing the interviewees—perhaps their tone of voice or body language, for example—reveal dimensions in our multidimensional understanding of the work at hand. And, as always, through dialogue we begin to understand.

### ***Stimulated Recall***

Patton (2002) stated, “The purpose of each interview is to record as fully and as fairly as possible that particular interviewee’s perspective” (p. 381). The

semistructured interview questions are included in Appendix A. I carefully analyzed the videotapes for additional information that the participants might have communicated in nonverbal cues and gestures that would be relevant to a further understanding of the relationships, as well as the verbal conversations with the participants. Video documentation revealed the participants' diverse communicative abilities. During the process of video recording the interviews, I took limited anecdotal and observational notes to verify points of conversation. The initial videotaped interviews were adequate, and follow-up sessions for additional basic interpretive video interviews proved unnecessary, as the data revealed thick rich description as needed.

When the initial video recording was complete, after a short time I asked the informants to watch their videos with me and offer feedback and comments on their interviews through a process that Bloom (1954; as cited in Pirie, 1996) called *stimulated recall*, which includes consideration of nonverbal cues and gestures in addition to verbal content. According to Calderhead (1981; as cited in Pirie, 1996), the rationale for using stimulated recall is that "the cues provided by the audio-tape or video tape (would) enable the participant to 'relive' the episode to the extent of being able to provide, in retrospect, an accurate verbalized account of his original thought processes" (p. 7). This is a means of fully engaging in analysis through discussion with the participants in which they reveal insights as feedback whenever possible on their nonverbal cues and gestures, their interviews, and their thoughts on friendship. I then documented these views in a



written format. Through this process of viewing the videotapes, the participants were able to further communicate their views on their own individual interviews.

### **Participant Selection/Sampling**

Patton, Vaughan, and Yin (as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) cautioned, “Achieving the greatest understanding of the critical phenomena depends on choosing the case well” (p. 451). Patton (2002) described *purposive sampling* as

cases for study . . . (e.g., people, organizations, communities, cultures, events, critical incidences) that are selected because they are “information rich” and illuminative; that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomena of interest; sampling then, is aimed at insight about the phenomena, not empirical generalizations from a sample to a population. (p. 40)

My participant selection for this study was purposive in nature, which served the research because I required an in-depth investigation into close and ongoing friendships. Within the parameters of the study, the participants needed to be able to make their views known about their relationships. I selected two dyadic relationships. The criterion for the selection was a pair of young friends that included one friend with a significant disability and one friend without a significant disability. I asked potential participants to become involved in the study through local or provincial organizations for people with developmental disabilities, family support groups, and networking in postsecondary environments. The pairs of young friends that participated in the study were selected based upon the criteria for the study.

In this case, for example, I asked various organizational groups to approach potential participants to ask them if they were interested in taking part in

the study. The network of parents within an immediate geographic area is an important and knowledgeable resource, and I also contacted them through family support organizations. In addition, postsecondary institutions helped me to make important contacts to find people who were interested in the study.

As described, I contacted potential participants through various local and provincial organizations that generally help individuals with developmental disabilities, as well as those focused on specific disabilities such as autism and Down syndrome. I also circulated a description of my study in those organizations' newsletters. Furthermore, in an effort to find interested individuals in local and surrounding areas, I searched for participants through organizations that offer day programs for persons with various disabilities. I also contacted inclusive postsecondary coordinators who are responsible for various colleges and universities throughout the province, to include persons with disabilities in university and college life, for recommendations of potential participants who were involved in friendships and might be willing to take part in the study.

Although I contacted a few families they often declined to participate because they were concerned that talking about a friendship might disrupt or alter it in some way. Other less common reasons included the reluctance of one parent to allow his or her son or daughter even if the other parent agreed, as well as other time commitments. The following respondents fulfilled my research needs.

I secured my first group of three people through a provincial organization for persons with a developmental disability. This group included a relationship between a young person, Aimee, who was 20 years old, and Shani, who was 23

years old. Brenda, Aimee's mother, was the third participant who was able to offer her perspective on the nature of the friendship.

The second group of three people resulted from a contact at a postsecondary educational institution: Emily, who was 31 years old; Alethea, who was 29 years old; and Sally, a professor and a longtime friend of Emily. At one point both young women had attended one of Sally's classes, but her involvement in their relationship was from the perspective of her knowledge of the relationship through Emily. I conducted basic interpretive video interviews with all six participants; they included each pair of friends and a person who was able to offer a different perspective on the friendship. The first group, Aimee and Shani were interviewed together and Brenda and was interviewed individually. The second group, Emily, Alethea and Sally were interviewed individually. As soon as possible after, I conducted stimulated recall interviews to allow the interviewees to add to or clarify what they had already said.

I did not use scrapbooks as part of the research process. When I asked the participants if they would like to make a scrapbook together, they were not interested. However, one of the participants had a photo album somewhat like a scrapbook that was of interest to me and served as a starting point for their participation. However, because the photo album actually belonged to one participant's mother and not the friends, I did not include it as part of the scrapbook process.

The participants created a collage during the videotaping with the central theme of friendship. Aimee, an assistant Sunday school teacher, created her

collages, sometimes with help from Shani, to help her to communicate to her Sunday school classes and develop and express her own ideas.

### **Data Collection**

The primary method of data collection was the interpretive interview, which was the foundation for the videotaped data. A number of steps are involved in data collection, and Wellington (2000) explained that “the recording of interviews may involve note taking, more detailed record-keeping, tape recording or, in some cases, photographic or video recordings” (p. 84). Videotaped interviews must have adequate footage because it is a labor-intensive task to reshoot the video. It is best to collect as much data on video as possible at the outset of the research process.

### ***Timeline***

The interpretive video interviews took 30 to 60 minutes. I identified and used relevant video clips and transcripts as part of the data-analysis process. The participants reviewed all of the raw video footage of their interviews after their initial video interpretive interview, and I then asked them to verify through stimulated recall what they had said and to add clarifying remarks if necessary. I recorded my observations in the form of field notes that included all of the documented feedback from the participants, the notes that I took during the interviews, and any anecdotal information that emerged during the research process.

After I videotaped the interview with each set of friends, I asked the Professor and parent about the friendship and for their comments on specific

portions of the data from their perspective. I also videotaped these interviews. The questions that I asked them, were for the most part after the first interviews with the friends so that they could comment on the dyadic interviews.

### ***Interpretive Interview***

I selected the qualitative, basic interpretive interview format for this study. Patton (2002) explained that “qualitative data describe. They take us, as readers, into the time and place of the observation so that we know what it was like to have been there” (p. 46). I sent a letter to the participants to explain the time commitment required and what the research would involve, and I included the consent and release forms (Appendix B) and the interview questions (Appendix A).

Because I used video recordings for the interviews, I did not require the backup audiotapes that I had previously thought would be necessary. My process included (a) an informal interview and initial discussion of the questions, (b) a videotape of the interview, and (c) a review of the tapes individually (stimulated recall) by all of the participants, so that they could add to their videotaped interview.

### ***Scrapbooks***

The participants did not feel that scrapbooks would be useful to describe their friendship in a relevant manner. Although I felt that scrapbooks would help me to further understand the friendships, I did not use them because the friends did not feel that they could portray their friendships further through this means.

### ***Informants' Interviews***

The teacher and parent informants who know the participants and their friendship well offered comments from their perspective that further added to the understanding of the nature of the friends' relationships. I formulated their interview questions based on information that emerged from the dyadic interpretive video interviews. I also videotaped the interviews with the Professor and parent and added them to my collection of video data to further my understanding of the nature of the dyadic relationships. These other perspectives are substantive viewpoints, and because relationships are not easily measured or discerned from any one perspective, I have attempted to illuminate what is important from a number of relevant perspectives. The informants' viewpoints reveal crucial information that perhaps is not evident from inside the relationship. The informants commented on the existing and relevant video segments, their prior knowledge about the friendships, and what they felt was important to emphasize during this process.

### **Data Analysis**

Miles and Huberman (1994) referred to the important process of “early analysis” (p. 50)—an ongoing process of checking back and forth between the data collection and analysis to inform the work; it involves “thinking about the existing data and generating strategies for collecting new, often better data” (p. 50).

Merriam (2002) described data analysis as follows:

The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns (presented as categories, factors, variables, themes) that cut through the data.

Findings are a mix of these recurring patterns supported by the data from which they were derived. The overall interpretation will be the researcher's understanding, mediated by his or her particular disciplinary perspective, of the participant's understanding of the phenomenon of interest. (p. 38)

Merriam explained that "one begins with a unit of data (any meaningful word, phrase, narrative, etc.) and compares it to another unit of data, and so on, all the while looking for common patterns across the data" (p. 14).

Coding can be started from a list developed with specific themes in mind that are utilized in their abbreviated form. The list "comes from the conceptual framework and list of research questions" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 58). Because the process of analysis requires that themes and recurrent patterns from the data be developed, they also need to be recorded. "First level coding is a device for summarizing segments of data, . . . [and] pattern coding is a way of grouping those summaries into a smaller number of sets, themes, or constructs" (p. 69).

Initially, I reviewed the interpretive video interviews to select segments that I felt revealed important information. This first look at the data familiarized me with the interviews. Because I recorded the videos at different times, I first analyzed the tapes of Aimee, Shani's, and Brenda's interviews. I viewed the video recordings in their raw form, showed the videotaped data to the participants, and asked them to verify their thoughts on the questions that I had asked and to add anything that they felt was pertinent. In transcribing the video data I began to determine what was relevant and identify starting points and patterns of information to create my initial themes. By listening to and reviewing the videos

and reading through the transcripts, I began to understand more about the data that I had collected. After this initial process, I color-coded an initial list of themes. During this analysis I repeated the process until the codes, categories, themes, and patterns had all been revealed. I also analyzed nonverbal cues and gestures that I considered relevant. Video analysis is painstaking work that requires viewing the tapes many times to identify recurrent categories and themes. Merriam (2002) recommended:

At this point, you have to immerse yourself in your data; listen to it, read it touch, it play with it, copy it, write on it, color code it, over and over again. Keep track of possible themes that arise from your data and titles for chapter headings or papers when they come to mind. Envision your written product—what it will look like, how the data will be displayed, where you will be in the text—and write down what you think. (p. 396)

Strauss, Lincoln, and Guba (as cited in Miles & Huberman, 1994)

explained that “coding and recoding are over when the analysis itself appears to have run its course—when all of the incidents can be readily classified, categories are ‘saturated,’ and sufficient numbers of regularities ‘emerge’” (p. 62). However, Miles and Huberman offered a word of caution that understanding comes in layers and that it is important to be open to other layers before the work is complete. Verifying the data that I collected from the videos, the stimulated recall process, and selected segments was essential.

### **Trustworthiness and Truth Value**

Trustworthiness as described in Wellington (2000) “is a criterion that Lincoln and Guba (1985) described as an alternative to the traditional reliability and validity in judging educational research. Trustworthiness has four aspects:



(a) credibility, (b) transferability (external validity), (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability (the latter two are parallel to reliability)” (p. 201).

As Merriam (2002) explained, “Internal validity asks the question, how congruent are one’s findings with reality?” (p. 25). The purpose of this study was to discover what was important about these dyadic relationships. The research process must be thoroughly documented and the data triangulated to ensure accuracy and trustworthiness. With the notion in mind that there are multiple realities, Merriam also suggested that “reality in qualitative inquiry assumes that there are multiple, changing realities and that individuals have their own unique constructions of reality” (p. 25) and that, “from an interpretive perspective, triangulation remains a principal strategy to ensure for validity and reliability” (p. 26).

The purpose of gathering multiple sources of data from the transcripts of the interpretive video interviews, stimulated recall, feedback from a third party (Professor and parent), and field notes is to establish the credibility of the research process. It also included feedback from the participants whenever possible to establish the internal validity of the research.

According to Moustakas (as cited in Creswell, 1997), the researcher’s perception is key in “establishing the truth of things” (p. 207). To get at this truth, the researcher must do so through “intersubjective validity” (p. 207), in which the meaning is evident to the researcher first, who then asks the interviewees to support his or her views in a “back- and-forth social interaction” (p. 207). To

establish the truth, the researcher must take steps to ensure that he or she has maintained rigorous standards.

For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that the participants viewed video segments of themselves and offered their feedback and clarification on what they said or how they expressed themselves. Whenever possible, I also gave the participants ongoing opportunities to add to the study and the questions that I asked them. This and the stimulated recall process helped me to assess the validity of the transcripts.

What is verification? Creswell (1997) recommended “us[ing] the term verification instead of validity, because verification underscores qualitative research as a distinct approach, a legitimate mode of inquiry in its own right” (p. 201). Verification of the research is also essential to ensure transferability and define the quality of the study. Creswell explained that this perspective is supported by “thick rich description,” and the “closeness to participants in the study adds to the value of the study” (p. 201). With a small selection of participants, the value of the research will be tested in light of the ongoing depth of the interview process. The text will help to understand the data through member checking and coding, and, according to the advice of Miles and Huberman (1994), I explored themes through a second level or layering of the data, which offered further insight.

Lincoln and Guba (1986) asserted that

the criteria to test rigor in the conventional scientific paradigm are well known: . . . the truth value of the inquiry or evaluation (internal validity), its applicability (external validity or generalizability), its consistency (reliability or replicability), and its neutrality (objectivity). (p. 74)

The steps that the researcher takes before the interpretive work begins include, for example, revelation of his or her bias from the beginning of the study, triangulation, and field notes that include both observational and reflexive entries. Taking these steps ensure that the work is sound and thorough; they also ensure verification. Polkinghorne (1989; as cited in Creswell, 1997) viewed validity as “the notion that an idea is well grounded and well supported” (p. 208).

The researcher must ask various questions, according to Polkinghorne (as cited in Creswell, 1997): (a) Did the interviewer influence the subjects’ description in any way? (b) Is the transcript accurate, and does it convey the meaning of the presentation? (c) In the analysis, could other conclusions have been reached, and did the researcher identify them? (d) Are the general description and the transcription similar in content and in original examples of the experience? and (e) Is the description situation specific, and does it hold in general in other situations? These questions must continually be kept in mind as the work gains momentum and the researcher conducts and transcribes the interviews.

I was concerned about being able to transfer or generalize the work. According to Patton (2002), “While one cannot generalize from single case or very small samples, one can learn from them—and learn a great deal, often opening up new territory for further research” (p. 46). The data that I collected came from two small groups of people who offered their perspective on the friendships to others. Because of the size of the groups, the findings cannot be generalized but offer understanding—perhaps a new and fresh understanding—

and clarification while adding to an existing knowledge base. Guba (as cited in Patton, 2002) cautioned that “in the spirit of naturalistic inquiry we should regard each possible generalization only as a working hypothesis, to be tested again in the next encounter and again in the encounter after that” (p. 583). The goal of this research was to describe the friendships in rich detail. I cannot assume that they are representative of all existing or possible friendships between people with or without disabilities. We do not hear enough from people who have disabilities, and their voices are important. Hearing from individuals who have developmental disabilities is a refreshing experience that offers a glimpse into a world to which we might not have had adequate prior access and perhaps furthers the understanding of the nature of friendships.

Eisner (as cited in Creswell, 1997) stated, “We seek a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility, that allows us to feel confident about our observations, interpretations, and conclusions” (p. 198). Additionally, he likened research work to detective work in that the researcher brings together many pieces of the work to ensure that the product is trustworthy. Most important, however, Eisner cautioned that the work must become persuasive, by which he meant that the evidence that we seek will provide sufficient data to be taken as a serious and substantial effort on the part of the researcher to ensure credibility.

I included video segments, stimulated-recall data, additional perspectives of the Professor and parent, and field notes to ensure trustworthiness. The ongoing insights and notes that I generated became part of the documentation process. Whenever possible, I shared these ideas, notes, and concepts with the participants

and asked them for any further clarification that they might offer on particular aspects of the work.

As the researcher, my biases include that, as a parent of a young man who has a developmental disability, I believe that many positive things can occur for and be achieved by persons with developmental disabilities. For example, friendships between persons who have developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers can be meaningful and valued by both people in the relationship. Furthermore, I believe that these friendships may blossom naturally and develop through support and facilitation.

“Without validity, it is argued, there is no truth; without truth there can be no trust in a text’s claim to legitimacy (or authority)” (Lincoln & Denzin, 2003, p. 141). Lincoln and Guba (as cited in Patton, 2002) suggested ensuring “trustworthiness and authenticity by being balanced, fair, and conscientious in taking account of multiple perspectives, multiple interests, and multiple perspectives” (p. 575).

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

### Aimee and Shani

Aimee began her relationship with Shani (Figure 1), through Shani's role as a support worker for her in a family managed support situation. They also were able to attend an inclusive college together where they were enrolled in courses. Aimee continues to teach Sunday school to young girls and Shani studies to be a teacher through a university program.



*Figure 1.* Shani and Aimee.

Brenda is Aimee's mother and hired Shani to support her daughter. Brenda offered her perspective on how the relationship was facilitated and how the friendship between Aimee and Shani is evolving.

### ***Interview Context***

I interviewed the two young women in the backyard of Aimee's house simultaneously to ensure that the participants were comfortable about conversing in a potentially overwhelming situation. The follow-up stimulated recall interviews were conducted again at the home of Aimee and Brenda where they went through the videotapes at the same meeting on an individual basis. Shani did her stimulated recall interview with me at her new university location. Brenda, Aimee's mother was interviewed at her home as well as it ensured that the participants could be filmed at one time.

### ***Communication***

Aimee is a young woman who is able to speak for herself. Shani and Aimee also used alternative communication methods that are visual in nature and have been developed as means of communication. Although a journal example will not be included here, it should be noted that Aimee and Shani recorded their daily activities in journals, which allows Aimee to tell Brenda what she did during the day. Shani and Aimee talk through what they have done together, and then Aimee shares her day with her mother: "Come see my day." At times Aimee will draw a picture in her journal. In addition to writing in the journals, they develop collages together, which are pictures that they cut out and paste onto a large sheet of paper. These collages are part of the Sunday school lessons that she teaches and include pictures of Jesus. These visuals create a way for her to communicate with others, and also allow others to communicate with Aimee.

It should also be noted that some quotes may overlap as they fit into more than one relevant theme.

### ***What the Friends Do Together***

I will discuss what Aimee and Shani do together on a daily basis to offer some insight into and understanding of the development of their friendship. In addition to spending time together every day, while they were in school from September to April, Aimee audited courses at the college that Shani was attending. Since the end of the school year they have spent their days together off campus. They go for walks, have a good time together, laugh and share a lot, and are actively engaged in many activities together to help Aimee to grow and learn. However, it is evident that it is not one-way learning; discovery is part of the process of sharing between the two young women. Their learning motivates both Aimee and Shani to reach for and achieve goals.

Shani and Aimee cook and have become “salad chefs.” They also cook pasta and simple meals and make sandwiches. “When I help Aimee to develop talents and abilities, like cook, mop the floor, she would do it for her mom and become more independent, and [she] said, ‘I can do it myself.’”

In addition, they swim together to stay healthy and Shani said: “That’s a good thing.” They talk, have fun, and do day-to-day activities together such as washing their hair and making lunch. She further said, “The things that happen in life . . . we get to share together every day.” An activity that they do together and also a form of communication for Aimee, that was mentioned previously, is the collage that she and Shani make together for Aimee’s Sunday school teacher-



assistant job. Shani helps her to find pictures and words to put Aimee's weekly lesson together:

I help her to cut out, because we end up with spirals. Aimee seems to be a visual/auditory learner, although she cannot use letters and alphabet. She would add to the collage by finding her own picture and tell me why it would fit in and use the picture, like hippo brushing teeth. She gravitates toward cutting out pictures of Jesus without anyone directing her.

Also another noteworthy activity that they do together, and another form of communication for Aimee, is the journal in which the two young women record their days together. When I asked what the journals do, Shani replied that they give Aimee "a voice." I asked Aimee questions while we were washing the dishes: "What happened?" And she would answer." Shani described this process: "I am a scribe for Aimee's words, her description. There was one journal where we just drew pictures, and then Aimee would offer a brief description."

They also read books such as *Charlotte's Web* together and volunteer at a senior's residence, where they play bingo with the residents.

Shani and Aimee also go on camping trips with friends. Shani asked Aimee, "So you came away from the camp with a whole bunch more friends, huh?" Aimee agreed, and Shani continued, "So she'll come out and do activities with the same bunch of friends, and they will all know Aimee."

An important part of their relationship is the time that they have spent together in the backyard planting a garden, and they are involved in its upkeep. They weed the garden and help with yard work. This garden and Shani's metaphor of the blossoming of their friendship like the plants that they have planted help to understand how their relationship evolved.

Shani explained about a scrapbook from August 2007: “Those were my friends, where we went camping together.” Brenda, Aimee’s mother, had put it together. Shani and Aimee are not interested in scrapbooking; as Shani put it, “I suck at scrapbooking.”

They also share the same faith.

Brenda further commented on Aimee and Shani’s friendship:

So they enjoy the swimming, they enjoy the walks, they enjoy the discovery. Shani is an amazing individual who can bring life to anything, so the green trees, the purple flowers, the worm on the ground that Aimee referenced, catching the worm, so it just became meaningful.

### ***Who Is a Friend?***

In this section I explore friendship from the perspective of what a friend is for the people involved in the friendship. This also includes how friendship feels as a way to describe what friendship is.

Shani feels good in Aimee’s presence and sees Aimee as friendly and loving. A friend also makes Aimee feel “glad.” It is obvious that having a friend, and her explanation of what a friend is and how a friend feels, is that it makes her happy to be around that person, and she expresses this in a way that is clear.

Shani also explained:

A friend is someone you can just be around and be happy to be around. I think a friend is someone you can enjoy being around. You can feel safe with and laugh with, and just enjoy the good things that come about in life even without being able to say anything. A friend is someone you can just be around and be happy to be around.

Shani also noted that there are “intangibles that I can’t describe that are just our relationship,” which speaks to something within the relationship:

I can't give you words, though I usually like words. There are no words that I can put a finger on that describe this friendship that feels like it is older than we are. That we were friends somewhere before, so we have a bond and a unity that just exists.

Shani and Aimee also talked about what a friend does and how a friend makes them feel:

S: A good friend helps you feel how in your life, Aimee?

A: Talk.

S: Someone you can talk with?

A: Yes.

S: And if you are feeling a sad day, what do you think a good friend would do?

A: Cheer me up.

S: Cheer you up. And if your friend was feeling sad, what would you do as a friend?

A: Hug.

S: Give them a hug. Help them feel glad?

A: Yeah.

S: A good friend is definitely someone you can talk to, that you can cheer up, and they can cheer you up too.

Shani explained that their journal is where they talk about how they feel:

“We use the journal to ask questions about what happened in the day and how Aimee felt about it.”

Shani noted that friends help us to become more than what we are now and that “I feel that I am a friend because I have been able to help her do that.” However, there was a time when Shani felt frustrated, and their “communication was abysmal” because she felt that she was not doing much good in Aimee’s life. She would go home frustrated and tired. She knew that

Aimee felt the same way, that Aimee did not like me . . . . It went from that to seek for ways that I could see things that were good . . . . I wanted to tap into ways to help me in my job, but also to open my heart to learning how to love her as a friend . . . . [Therefore,] we weren’t just working together, but we were learning how to like and to get along with

each other . . . . I watched me learn to love and to learn to reach out to build a friendship. We have a friendship that we could do more than just work together, that she was doing the same thing with me, so there was this trust that was built; there was life that was given. I was looking to laugh and enjoy instead of ahhhhh! [From the videotape it is evident that this is an expression of how frustrated she was]

The girls talked about their interactions with others on camping trips and about making other friends and said that it was “fun to make friends.”

When Shani moves away to go to school, Aimee finds it “hard,” after Shani left to go away to school, and she also said “gone,” in regard to Shani leaving. Although Aimee is using a simple phrase or one word to say how she feels, her expression does not lack clarity.

Also, Shani mentioned that when she viewed the tape after she moved away from Calgary, she realized that she too missed Aimee.

When Brenda first met Shani, it felt “good,” and Aimee also felt comfortable with Shani. Brenda can see that they enjoy doing things together as friends, that they “enjoy the swimming, they enjoy the walks, they enjoy the discovery.” Aimee feels “joy, and looks forward to her mornings with Shani. And Aimee shares her joy and that energizes both of them and I think that is a powerful part of the friendship.”

Brenda told me that Shani had asked her, if anything should happen to Brenda, to consider her

someone who would be a guardian for Aimee, and I thought that speaks for her commitment from the heart, not about something else. That she would value and be concerned for Aimee’s future beyond my being is powerful, and we won’t be saying goodbye. She says she’s leaving in August, but things don’t end there. It changes, and life will always change . . . . Cognitively, in a deep, emotional level for Shani, Aimee has touched her life in a deep meaningful way.

For Brenda, Aimee’s relationship with Shani “brings peace to her heart.”

***Faith***

Faith is an integral part of the lives of both participants, and they discussed it on a level that initially did not seem obvious. They did not openly discuss it, but referred to its impact at a deeper level and their preparation for Aimee’s Sunday school class by creating collages.

I ask Shani how long they had known each other:

Well, I have been supporting Aimee since August 2007, so we have been friends for almost a year. But who knows how much longer before that, before we both came to Earth? Who knows long we have been friends? We have been friends since August.

Her implication that they knew each other before they both came to Earth led to a humorous exchange between the two.

Being able to catch a glimpse of Aimee’s divine potential, being able to see her worth as an individual, and being able to tap into that and find ways to help her to grow and to develop not just a 40-hour week—I get paid for relationship, but a relationship that is a friendship—I notice more every day the intangibles that I can’t describe that are just our relationship. I can’t give you words, though I usually like words. There are no words for me to put a finger on, this friendship that feels that it’s older than we are, that we were friends somewhere before. So we have a bond and a unity that just exists.

This consistent theme was evident in Shani and Aimee’s work on the collage that features Jesus in the visual. Aimee is a teacher assistant at Sunday school and teaches younger girls through visuals/collages and the lessons that are taught. However, the collages also serve as a way for Aimee to communicate with other people beyond her class. For example, Brenda commented on the experience of the various church members who stop and ask Aimee about her

lessons as she leaves the church. This occurs many times so that Aimee teaches the lesson a number of times before they can leave the church that day.

I asked Aimee, “Who do you teach?”

A: Girls.

S: Pictures—this is about prayer, huh? We find pictures and words that describe the lesson. It’s amazing, because I will just hand over the magazine—because, see? some of them are a little bit chopped up—I hand over the magazine, and I have already talked about the meaning and the images that we are going to be doing. She finds the pictures that she wants to express those things, huh? Specifically, there were lots of pictures about Jesus . . . . And strong, huh? And why is this picture important, Aimee?

A: Flowers.

S: Where do we grow flowers?

A: In the garden.

S: Yeah, it also shows us about service. We like to help people. Why do you think pictures about Jesus are important?

A: Because it’s fun.

As Brenda, Aimee’s mother, mentioned, when Shani talked about where the friends had met previously, she referred to a belief that in their past, perhaps in another place, they were friends before this particular relationship. Because they are of the same faith, Shani said:

I didn’t have to worry about saying religious things. There is childlike faith, where the Savior says “Be like a child.” With Aimee there is a willingness to do new things; there is the necessary trust and willingness to submit to things that are needful [to get things done] . . . . We lived here before; we came here, formed relationships, like a kindred spirit.

Shani also referred to something that underlies what they share, and I asked her what she meant: “There is an underlying bond, a purpose and goals; there is something better or more important than a job. There is faith, and each one of us has a purpose. “

When I asked Shani and Aimee whether they felt that their friendship is special in some way, Shani said that perhaps because “it fits everything that they do together, it is in some way special.” It teaches them both things, and, really, it “is special is because it exists.”

S: What makes us special Aimee? [Gestures]

A: A smile.

S: Smiling. A smile can make our friendship special.

Shani also felt that it was special with regard to how she feels about Aimee:

As far as that goes, I’d say that it’s special because of how I feel in regards to Aimee. As I said, I started as a support worker with Aimee, and so that comes with a list of things that you are as a support worker. And so I could just have a job and have that be something I get paid for and move on with my life; the end. As she’s had other support workers in the past that have done that as well, perfectly fine, great people anyway, but being able to catch a glimpse of Aimee’s divine potential, being able to see her worth as an individual, and being able to tap into that and find ways to help her to grow and to develop not just a 40-hour week—I get paid for relationship, but a relationship that is a friendship— . . . And so being able to find things that were challenges and work on how we could overcome them together has brought us together in a way that I think is special; that is, it could just look normal on the surface, and it probably is, but there is something underneath. Just seeing how awesome and amazing she is sometimes, I am just in awe at the person that Aimee is and how I feel I help her to grow. So I definitely say that that counts as friendship for me, and I’d say it’s a special friendship.

### ***The Evolving Relationship/Facilitation/Brenda***

Shani began this relationship as a support worker, and it developed into a friendship, with daily one-on-one experiences over the course of a year. After that year Shani moved to another city, where she continues to go to school. This relationship did not develop on its own; it required facilitation as a way to overcome the barrier that existed between them. That barrier was where Shani felt frustrated and did not feel that she “was doing much good in Aimee’s life.” There

were times “that I know Aimee did not like me.” To make the relationship work better it required some support, and that support came from Brenda [Aimee’s mother], who helped to nurture the relationship. According to Shani:

Like any friendship, I think like a maturing and just a gaining of greater strength through experience and getting to know each other and being able to talk with each other. When I first started, Aimee wasn’t much for chatting with me or talking to me very much at all, so being able to communicate more and being able to find out things that she needed and how I understand her, and sometimes I just know what she wants or what she is thinking. Like any best friend that I have had in the past or any good friend, the more you are around someone, the more you get to truly know them. The more you understand the things that they need—you can just look at something and laugh because you know that they are going to laugh, so there’s just a maturing and a growing, like any good friendship.

When I asked what was it like when Shani first realized that their friendship was developing, she described at length how it evolved. She likened it to her planting of flowers together with Aimee:

We put them in the ground and we put them to sleep, and in the springtime they slowly grew, little by little. Then they came up, and they grew and they blossomed, very similar to the way friendships in general work and specifically how Aimee and I work.

Initially, Shani was frustrated because their

communication was sometimes quite abysmal. I wasn’t feeling like I was doing much good in Aimee’s life. There are just days that are hard, and as a support worker, . . . it stretched me beyond my capacities that I had at that time. And sometimes I just came home frustrated and just tired, and it went from that to seek for ways that I could see things that were good, and not only that, to be able to explore and to build on those things that were good.

This is the crucial point in the evolvment of the relationship. Brenda described her approach to the relationship as clinical, based on goals and objectives, and



because the situation was not working, she tried to resolve the problem. As

Brenda said in regard to Shani's frustration when they discussed the situation:

As we chatted and talked communication which is our best tool, I think I needed to do something in handing over that time and relationship and trust. And specifically, I remember saying, "Why don't you spend the night at our house and wake up with us on a Saturday morning because I am not working, and let's just see the way Aimee is with me so that you don't have some preconceived ideas of the way that you are trying to make it be. And I'm not approaching all these goals and objectives, and just be with us." And I think it was the best thing that we did, was to have a pajama day, make breakfast, enjoy each other . . . . And somehow I think that affected Aimee in seeing that acceptance and "she's in my house, and we are all just friends." And nobody labeled it as such; it just was more natural. So I think then as they continued spending time and doing things, the focus wasn't such a clinical approach, I felt there was a switch, a paradigm switch for Shani. I don't know that Aimee was conscious of it, of anything different happening, but she responded more to a paradigm switch in Shani and perhaps in myself. So it was just exploring and experiencing and then that communication between the two of them. There was listening on Shani's part and watching Aimee's cues and behaviors, and she said she had learned things about Aimee that maybe before she wasn't awake to. And I think her putting that effort in—so in that paradigm shift that we talked about, I think there was a relaxed process that started, and just being that was most important than any goals.

This effort on Brenda's part, or perhaps a shift in her perspective, changed the situation for the better, and because of this shift or change, their relationships deepened. Shani became aware of

the things that I saw in Aimee that I wanted to see more of, focusing on ways that I could tap into, ways to help me in my job, but also to open my heart to learning how to love her as a friend, so that we weren't just working together, but we were learning how to like and to get along with each other.

This is Shani's understanding of how the relationship grew and evolved, and, for the most, part Brenda saw it evolve in the same way. As a mother, however, Brenda mentioned that she could not understand how it was hard for Shani, as

Shani said that it was between Shani and Aimee. It is different when we are with our children because we do see a “natural progression.” When I listened to Shani “I kept thinking, I don’t understand, I don’t find it hard, it’s because we know them, we grow with them, and we have a natural relationship with them.”

As Shani said, there were days when they were learning how to like each other and to get along together, not to fill a job, but to learn how to reach out to the other person and to build trust, little by little. She added:

And it’s kind of just grown from there—and especially since I have known that I’m moving—that I see the beauty of the flower that is our friendship. I see the things that are great and amazing, and it’s taught me how to build friendships with people in general; it’s made me a better friend to the people that I live with and the people that I come in contact with, because I’ve learned how to build a friendship; we had a choice to build a friendship or just to work together. I’m so glad we chose to learn how to build a good relationship. So it’s amazing.

When I asked where she wants the relationship to be in the future Shani responded:

As far as that goes, I’d like it to still be in existence. I move to Edmonton in just over a month, and so the type of friendship we have right now, or the amount of time we get to spend on it every day, is definitely going to change. But I would like the relationship to continue to grow, to be able to share those fun things about life, phone and say “Hi”; for me to be able to come back and visit, and I know that I always have a spare room I can come and crash in. But it’s to be able to still know that the friendship exists, even without me living in the same place. We can still laugh and have fun, huh?

From Shani’s perspective, she learned to open her heart. She and Aimee were not just working together; they were also learning how to like each other and get along together.

For Brenda a signal that the relationship had deepened was Shani's promise that, in the event that anything happened to Brenda, she would take care of Aimee; it was a profound moment for Brenda, and she saw it as a commitment from the heart that Shani would want to be a part of Aimee's future.

***How the Friends' Benefit from the Friendship***

Most relationships benefit both people, and it is apparent that the relationship between Shani and Aimee is no different. Both young women talked about what they get out of it. Aimee said, "It's fun to hang out together," which is evident in the many activities that they do together. Aimee has learned how to cook simple things and goes to many places with Shani; they take postsecondary courses and study together, they volunteer at a seniors' centre, and in the summer Aimee is Shani's assistant at a summer camp. Shani finds

ways to help her grow and to develop, not just a 40-hour week—I get paid for relationship, but a relationship that is a friendship, that I not only have a way to pay for school, but I have a friend that I look forward to finding things to laugh with, to laugh about with Aimee, to show her things and to help her to find things that will make her glad, that she'll stretch for and that she'll be able to achieve.

This is part of what was initially expected of Shani as someone who came into the job to help Aimee to achieve more. She also described a friend as "someone who enables us to become more than what we are right now."

Shani's relationship with Aimee has taught her how to build friendships with people in general, and

it has made me a better friend to the people I live with and the people that I come in contact with, because I've learned how to build a friendship that I—we had a choice to build a friendship or just work together, and I'm so glad we chose to learn how to build a good relationship. So it's amazing.

Shani spoke of how she feels in Aimee's presence:

I like how I feel when I am around Aimee. She has a very friendly and loving personality, and she puts up with me even when I am bossy. Do I get bossy sometimes? No? Whew! I like that she loves me every day.

Aimee has also gained additional friends from camping trips and other activities that she and Shani do together, and Shani explained that "they will all know Aimee" when she sees them again.

Because these participants share the same faith, they do not, as Shani said, "have to worry about saying religious things." They are not uncomfortable about sharing something different and do not have to explain concepts that are particular to their faith.

From Brenda's perspective, Aimee "gets a voice of what she wants her day to be," which means that she can make choices and become more independent. She has also seen Aimee's self-esteem grow tremendously. "She has great joy, and she looks forward to her mornings." And because Shani and Aimee share the simple things in life, "it energizes the two of them, and that's a powerful part of their friendship."

Brenda also commented that what Aimee has gained from the relationship is transferable because of her increased confidence and the "successful, meaningful connection to other building and networking of relationships. And not that they are in her life every day, but all of our relationships aren't always like that."

For Brenda, the relationship has "brought peace to her heart," and that Aimee has this relationship and so many positive experiences gives her

“confidence in exploring and broadening her world.” Brenda suggested that “life is about love, learning, sharing, and opening up, and to open up to others. It is learning on both sides.” It is critical to note that, without an extended family nearby, friends continue to be important. They become family, and, accordingly “May we continue to find more people,” and may the family continue to grow.

### ***Video Information***

The video data reveals additional information for the researcher. This is information that is expressed by the participants in nonverbal ways, like gestures and perhaps, tone of voice. We see the ongoing interactions between the participants that reveal additional information.

The participants look to one another and exchange nonverbal cues of understanding and assurance. They have an insider perspective as friends that is an apparent closeness that they do not express in words. There is an ongoing banter between them. Without this level of familiarity and friendship there can be a reserved hesitancy to express how we really feel; however, in Aimee and Shani’s friendship, this is not evident. When Aimee shrugged her shoulders in response to one of my questions, Shani glanced at her, and there was an understanding that passed between them, that they share something that they do not share with others.

Shani enhances Aimee’s level of comfort by her acknowledgment and support. She achieves this by glancing at Aimee, to see if she is in agreement with what she has said and through this she also includes her in the conversation. Because they were paired in the interview, Aimee felt supported by her friend

when I asked her questions. Although both Shani and Aimee were camera aware, however, they were not overwhelmed by its presence. There is much humor, laughing, and joy in their exchanges with one another. This reveals how well they get along, how much fun they have together. The researcher could see how positively they communicate with one another. Laughter can be a relief for anyone, and the friends use humor in this way. For example, Shani is often humorous, and if there is tension, it is eased, if not forgotten.

Once, Aimee responded with an abrupt reply to a question, when she did not really answer a question, and shrugged away the answer. Shani saw this cursory response, but let it go, and Aimee moved on to the next thing that she needed to do or say. When Aimee cut a very small portion of the paper for the collage, Shani quickly got rid of it for her as unnecessary. Shani seems to be aware of what Aimee's needs are and these responses may point to her supportive role in the friendship. However, Aimee's support for Shani was also evident on numerous occasions. This was most evident when she listened and responded to what Shani said when she answered her interview questions. Aimee would always nod and support her friend. The friends are animated as they discuss their day with one another. Furthermore, the enhanced communication was obvious when the camera recorded other aspects of the relationship.

The video interview with Brenda revealed that she is controlled, focused, and unflinching and a continual communicator.

### **Emily and Alethea**

Emily and Alethea (Figure 2) met in a criminology class at an inclusive local community college six years ago. Emily's goal is to be a teacher, and she is taking classes at the college toward her degree. Upon invitation, Emily talks to students at all levels about what it is like to be a person with a disability. Alethea is a teacher with a local school board and currently has a position in a behavior classroom.



*Figure 2. Alethea and Emily.*

Sally is a friend of Emily's and has had ongoing contact with Emily for a number of years. She is currently a faculty member in the Education program, where she teaches various courses in both undergraduate and graduate programs. Sally provides her perspective on their friendship.

### ***Interview Context***

I interviewed Emily and Alethea, first separately and then together as they interacted at a local college, using a basic interpretive video interview method. I felt that the college would be the best setting because they had met there and are familiar with the environment and would therefore feel comfortable. I also met Emily at the college for her follow-up stimulated recall of the interview. Alethea met me at the university for her second interview to follow up on her initial interview.

I interviewed Sally in her office, which was a convenient location and reflected her involvement; I knew that she too would be comfortable there. I also met her there for her follow-up stimulated recall interview.

Please note that I have cited some of the quotations from the interviews more than once because they encompass more than one relevant theme.

### ***What the Friends Do Together***

In this section I explore what Emily and Alethea do in their friendship, including a trip that they took together to explore their lives singularly and together at a conference on self-discovery.

As Emily said: “We met here [at the college] in 2003, and we have that bond of wanting to be educators, sharing our capabilities with other kids, giving back to other students.” Education is a strong bond in their friendship as well, and as she continues to work toward her degree, Alethea encourages her not to give up and talks about Emily’s graduation. She can imagine Emily walking across the stage to receive her degree.



The two friends continually encourage each other. Of course, it is not unusual for them to text or e-mail each other, and, according to Alethea, Emily sends random messages that lift her spirits:

“Hey, I hope you are having a great day.” . . . Or just having that person to go out with and not get into the poor me competition my day’s bad for this and my day’s bad for that. We don’t do that.”

Both girls talked about what they do together, and Alethea’s said: “We go eat, we go bowling, we go to the movies, we go to the mall, and we do a little shopping while we are out having lunch. We have that ritual.”

When I asked Alethea what the ritual is, she replied:

We meet at Entrance 50 WEM, and we go have lunch at Moxies. And after lunch we have a bite of brownie, and we’ll go walk around the mall, maybe go to a movie. That part of it varies, and we probably have lunch for an hour and a half, two hours because we are blabbing the whole time too . . . . We go out and have a great time . . . . I tell her stories about my students, and she tells me stories about midterms, and when she gets in the classroom she will have stuff that she is ready for, and listening to her talk about when I go back to school, and we are sort of preparing each other for the next stage of things by living vicariously through each other’s life experience in that way. We share the same interest in movies, like *Harry Potter* movies and stuff like that.

I asked Emily and Alethea what they do together, and Emily told me:

We go for lunch, we have been bowling, and recently we took a trip together. We went to Toronto, and that was the first trip on my own with a friend, and it was very special to me . . . . It was a life-changing experience for both of us. Because of this experience, I believe that it has made our friendship stronger than it was before. It was a life-changing experience; it made us stronger.

When I asked “How did it make you stronger?” Emily said, “We got the chance to see who we really are as people that we don’t normally see in everyday occurrences.” Alethea replied:

We both have a very strong passion, in personal growth and personal success. That's a very strong component to our friendship. I think we are both striving to be everything we can and do everything that we can in our lives.

Sally also talked about the trip:

Emily has traveled quite a bit outside of Canada, always with a family member, but I remember when I received an e-mail from her saying, "This is something new. I am going to Toronto. I am going all by myself, and it's a first," and she was so excited about it, and she was excited all the way through it. And I have seen pictures; she has sent me pictures at the conference at the public presentation, meeting one of her idols, and coming back, and that's really all that she has talked about—the excitement. And we all like to meet someone, whether we have read the person's books, met the person, someone who is a mentor. And I think that the gentleman that was at the conference is that kind of person, but beyond that it was that sense of independence. But more importantly, she felt normal, and that is very important. She is a very bright young woman, and for her to be able to feel normal is important, and I think she is. I think she is.

### ***Who Is a Friend?***

Emily described a friend as

somebody who you can trust, who is fun to be around, who is honest, who you can just be yourself around and not hide anything and be the person you really are. A good friend is someone who listens to you, who is trustworthy, who you give your opinion to and they will listen to you, and they won't judge you on it and will be there for you and support you in whatever you want to do . . . . Friendship to me is being able to be yourself—honest, open, and sharing your feelings, whatever they may be at the time. Sharing your true feelings towards your friends and being able to have a blast and being able to have a great time with one another.

Alethea described a good friend as someone

who inspires you, who helps you become a better version of yourself. Someone who knows when to be honest with you, and someone who may not tell you what you may be not ready to hear, knowing that difference . . . . Someone who listens to you, someone who can be there for you, but also a distraction for you. Someone who can be there for you is a good

balance or support or just be there for, or just being in that moment and doing whatever it is you are doing.

According to Alethea, a distraction is someone who takes you away from everyday stress: “We’re laughing like crazy. Any sort of stress, all that stuff that just goes away; and for how many hours that we are hanging out, we’re just having a great time.” Alethea considers Emily “reliable” and therefore gains strength from her as a friend.

When I asked “What is friendship to you?” Alethea answered:

It is so many different things. Friendships play a different role in your life. Friendships can be so many things. It can be having someone to rely on, having someone to motivate you, having someone to go shopping with. It fills so many different things. It is such a human experience to have someone to connect with. Ultimately, friendship is just another kind of connection. You have your loving connection with your life partner, with your parents, your siblings, your children. I think it is another one of those connections in life that we have to have . . . . I can’t say why I have to have it . . . . Well, think of life without friendship. I think that kind of answers it . . . . What I like about being friends is that we can have fun together and be serious at times, and yet we can have so much fun. We are there for each other when we need to be.

Emily concurred with Alethea’s description of the friendship: “She has a great sense of humor. I love her spontaneity and her outgoingness, and being around Alethea just makes me smile.”

Alethea commented:

She’s hilarious; we have so much fun. And really, she’s lying. I do not have a good sense of humor. She thinks I am funny, so that is good. She is a very positive person, and no matter what is going on, she is laughing. Things can be like shit hit the fan and it’s chaos, and Emily is laughing; it’s great. So we have a lot of fun together. She’s really very feminine, and it is nice to be around her and just be girls.

What is important about this relationship is Emily's and Alethea's ability to have fun and laugh, despite the various obstacles that they face. From this purity of heart and laughter they gain strength and have a good time together.

When I asked "What do you like about the relationship?" Alethea described it as

everything—knowing Emily and having someone in my life know me the way that Emily does . . . . It is a heart friendship . . . . It is a love friendship. It is very gentle and fragile and delicate. It is very much from the heart. I have friends that I go on a race with or go for a beer with, and each kind of friendship serves a different purpose in your life. My friendship with Emily is a heart friendship; it is very soul-feeding friendship . . . . I feel different around Emily. I feel refreshed, she is smiling and a sweet friend; she is kind. Like the snow is gone and life is good and the birds are chirping.

Alethea senses a difference when she is with Emily. She feels inspired and stronger, and having observed the two friends together, I noticed that Alethea seems to protect Emily. It is also the simple joy of being happy and spending time together laughing. They believe that they bring out and actualize their best selves.

### ***Sally***

Sally commented on Emily and Alethea's friendship:

Two things about a friendship: A friendship has to start off very naturally; two people just click, and I think that is what's happened here. And another thing about any friendship is that you have to put some effort into it, and I think they both have done that. Friendships take work, they take effort, they take time, and I think both young ladies have made that commitment, both because they genuinely wanted to. They are both caring people, and that's enough. Plus they share the same interests, a lot of the same interests—not all, but some.

### *Power Within*

It is evident that the power within Emily and Alethea's relationship empowers and creates a stronger bond between them. They are strongly passionate about belief and the power within their lives to transform themselves and become the best that they can be. It is also evident that they both wish to reach out to others. They feel that their bond of self-transformation and belief will help them to transcend their current limitations.

During my first interview with Emily on videotape, she did not mention one aspect of the conference that was particularly profound. However, when we met again to review the first interview, she told me:

Talking about the experience in Toronto is good. It takes me back to the conference. What was I thinking? I see exactly where I did not mention something in the interview: Alethea and I firewalked; we walked over coals in bare feet. Mind over matter. It was Tony Robbins who said to relax 45 minutes, mentally relaxing, thinking about how to do it. He said, "Keep your head up and focus; focus on straight ahead, and say a phrase like 'Kumas, kumas, kumas,' and then wipe your feet and celebrate." Each step you say it, you get the power to go over the coals. I had no electric chair in Toronto, and two people took me out, and I was barefoot. There was cheering from the crowd. They took me quickly over the coals. It was fire. There were hot coals and fire under. Awesome! . . . When I said to Alethea "I'm nervous," she said, "You are the firewalker." She knows who I am. Everybody knows who I am. You forget that you have it in you to push through . . . You can see that I am glowing when I talk about my experience. I am passionate about it. You can see it in my eyes.

In Toronto at the conference, and on the trip in general, Emily did not have a motorized wheelchair, and Alethea had to physically push the wheelchair around: "When we were in Toronto and I was helping, I was so stuck in my fear. We had a terrible wheelchair. I was pushing her around."

Alethea explained that

we did the firewalk, and it was late at night, and the nurse [who helped Emily to get into bed and get dressed] was gone. I am so respectful of her. I care about her. I knew I would be in a position to help her, but I didn't know to what extent. I had to help her in the bathroom and helped her get into bed. I could see how fragile she really is.

The difficulty that Alethea faced gave her renewed respect for Emily and what she experiences on a daily basis.

I asked "Why is personal growth so important?" and Alethea responded:

I can't speak for Emily. For me, I think it's just living life to its fullest potential. When I say *success*, I don't mean professional success; I mean emotional success, spiritual success; to strive to be at a stage in your life where you are really okay with everything, and there's just that positive sense of self, like a self-actualization.

From my observations, Emily and Alethea's friendship had taught them how to overcome their difficulties and persevere and win from interacting with one another. An admirable quality of both Emily and Alethea is that they will not give up in the face of adversity. This commonality has created a bond beyond superficiality; it speaks to similarities in their character. This character trait, which I discussed earlier, is further strengthened by their support for each other and speaks to their inner strength and determination.

Sally also noticed something about Emily:

She is just never going to give up, and I think that perseverance, that constantly striving to reach her goals, is just an inspiration. That's what draws people to Emily. She's just not going to give up . . . . I don't know Emily's family well. I have talked to her mom a couple of times, and she seems very supportive. But I think primarily it comes from within her. I think it is one of the unique qualities that Emily has, and she has faced some adversity, and she is not giving up. I think it comes from within Emily. I think that's one of her special qualities . . . . I think she has acquired some skills that have helped her deal effectively with adversity. I

know she still gets frustrated, but I don't think as much, and she is probably one of the most incredibly positive people that I have ever met in my life. Disability or no disability—just so positive about herself, about other people. She really looks for the best in others. She is not afraid to acknowledge strengths that she has and let other people know about them, and she doesn't boast. She is just genuinely Emily.

### *Is the Relationship Special?*

In this section I discuss how the relationship is special—the components of the relationship that make it different from others.

When I asked Emily what makes her relationship special in some way, she replied:

There are a couple of things that happened, but I will pinpoint one specific event that we share as friends. Like I said, we went to Toronto together. It was a life-changing experience for both of us. Because of this experience, I believe that it has made our friendship stronger than it was before. It was a life-changing experience; it made us stronger.

On the trip they

got the chance to see who we really are as people that we don't normally see in everyday occurrences . . . . I got a feeling of independence, and with that trip, it was my first independent trip on my own with a friend from Edmonton, so it was a growth experience for me, for both of us, and I learned a lot about myself from that trip. I can take trips on my own, think on my own without having to rely on family, without having to rely on or somebody else to be there. It was an experience that I will never forget because it allowed me to be normal—quote, unquote “normal.” And with my family, I have to rely on my family, and now this took me away from the whole reliance on family and put me in what able-bodied people do, put me in that scheme of things.

I also asked Alethea if her friendship with Emily is special:

Yes, absolutely, but I might cry if I tell you . . . . Emily talked a lot about our trip to Toronto. It really was a life-changing experience to do that, because when Emily asked if we could be roommates for this trip, I was scared because I thought, Oh, my god, she probably has all these things that she needs help with, and I don't know if I can help her with that stuff.

And that is a very intimidating thing, because as much as she is going to be independent, where does that put me? Are we friends, or how much help do I have to give her? And sharing a room together and seeing the everyday challenges that she had to face and going beyond myself and getting beyond those fears. I don't know if I can help her. And you sort of think to yourself, I am going to help one of my friends get dressed. It seems so outside of that comfort zone, and doing that so put me back in my place and really opened my eyes. I have so much respect for her, having had that experience. I wish everyone could have an experience like that.

When I asked Alethea what she meant when she said that the experience “put me back in my place,” she replied:

Well, just taking things for granted—like, what do you think when you go to bed at night? You think about the stuff you have to do in the morning, and thinking that in my mind and actually physically helping Emily into her bed really opens your eyes . . . because the conference that we were at in Toronto was very in-depth self-discovery, and really bringing out your authentic self and being comfortable with that person, and we always hide that person from everybody. We have this little person inside who is vulnerable and fragile and letting that person out—and I think our friendship is on a very different level because both of us got to know each other in a vulnerable opportunity. I don't know if that makes sense. It is a heart friendship.

Emily and Alethea had an opportunity to see more within their relationship that they might not have seen before in the same way, and they discovered more about each other within their relationship and by themselves.

Alethea added:

It is a love friendship. It is very gentle and fragile and delicate. It is very much from the heart. I have friends that I go on a race with or go for a beer with, and each kind of friendship serves a different purpose in your life. My friendship with Emily is a very heart friendship; it is a very soul-feeding friendship. Is that the purpose that it serves then? I think so, yes. It is a friendship of pure love and understanding and nonjudgment.

I asked Sally for her perspective on whether the relationship is different:



No. I think that what is special about this friendship is that it is genuine; it is not contrived. It is a normal friendship, and I don't think that many people with a disability have that opportunity to develop a true friendship, so that is what makes it unique and special . . . . I think that's what was interesting, that there wasn't anything unique. They talked about being serious at times; they talked about having fun, being goofy; they talked about being there for each other even when they don't realize they are doing it. It's just so normal; that's what I found so normal. I haven't had the chance to hear two people, one of whom has a disability, talk about their friendship with each other that was so cool for both of them and for me to watch that, so that it was just like any other friendship . . . . I think what is unique about this relationship: It is not different; it's the same. I look at friendships [that are], to me, true friendships. I have two true friends, and other than that I have colleagues, and I look at those two relationships and I see the same characteristics in the friendships that Emily has.

### *The Evolving Relationship*

The relationship, like any other relationship, is always evolving and changing, and Alethea commented on the evolution of their friendship:

I don't even know. I think it was just a matter of, when you take classes together or when you see each other in the cafeteria and you start talking about . . . a midterm that you have to do, whatever, I think that that's, yes, being in the same class just like anybody, taking the same classes together, I think . . . . It was a natural progression . . . . Friendship evolved little by little.

An important aspect of Emily and Alethea's evolving relationship is that their trip brought them closer. They were able to share an important moment in which understanding and tackling personal and intense moments of discovery made them stronger.

Alethea described the relationship as

everything—knowing Emily and having someone in my life know me the way that Emily does, because the conference that we were at in Toronto was very in-depth self-discovery and really bringing out your authentic self and being comfortable with that person, and we always hide that person from everybody.

Although it is difficult for anyone to predict where a relationship will be in a few years, Emily asserted, “I believe that our friendship will keep on growing from where we were and where we are today and keep on flourishing to a better and better friendship.” Alethea added:

There are certain things I would like us to do together. I would definitely like to see us take another trip together. We had a lot of fun with that, and I look forward to the day when Emily walks across the stage in graduation. That’s a big goal for her, and being part of that—and that will mean a lot when that day comes. And just doing more fun and silly things together like we do.

Sally voiced her perspective:

It’s hard to say. It depends. One or both of them could move to continue their studies. I think they will keep in touch. Like any friendship, it just depends; distance could play a role, but I think you’ll see them keep in touch. And then again, it depends on . . . how normal the friendship is, and that’s the constraints of any friendship. There’s nothing there that is different, and that’s the best thing about that friendship.

### ***How the Friends’ Benefit from the Friendship***

In this section I explore what the friends get out of their relationship—how they benefit and learn from one another because of their friendship.

Emily explained, “What I like about being friends is that we can have fun together and be serious at times, and yet we can have so much fun. We are there for each other when we need to be.” Alethea noted that

I feel different around Emily; I feel refreshed. She is smiling and a sweet friend; she is kind. Like the snow is gone and life is good and the birds are chirping . . . .

Emily talked a lot about our trip to Toronto. It really was a life-changing experience to do that, because when Emily asked if we could be roommates for this trip I was scared, because I thought, Oh, my god, she probably has all these things that she needs help with, and I don’t know if I can help her with that stuff. And that is a very intimidating thing,

because as much as she is going to be independent, where does that put me? Are we friends, or how much help do I have to give her? And sharing a room together and seeing the everyday challenges that she had to face and going beyond myself and getting beyond those fears, I don't know if I can help her. And you sort of think to yourself, I am going to help one of my friends get dressed. It seems so outside of that comfort zone, and doing that so put me back in my place and really opened my eyes. I have so much respect for her, having had that experience. I wish everyone could have an experience like that.

We did the firewalk, and it was late at night and the nurse [who helped Emily to get into bed and get dressed] was gone. I am so respectful of her. I care about her . . . . I knew I would be in a position to help her, but I didn't know to what extent. I had to help her in the bathroom and helped her get into bed. I could see how fragile she really is.

Alethea understood from that experience that she could see things in a different way:

Well, just taking things for granted—like, what do you think when you go to bed at night? You think about the stuff you have to do in the morning, and thinking that in my mind and actually physically helping Emily into her bed really opens your eyes.

Alethea noted that she had learned a lot from being around Emily

It's amazing how people respond to her. When we went to this seminar [conference], this guy we met, the crew helper, was really apprehensive and asked, "To what extent is she disabled?" She is hard to understand when she is excited. People say rude things to someone in a wheelchair . . . . When people are pissed off because of the wheelchair, she is laughing . . . . When we were in Toronto and I was helping, I was so stuck in my fear. We had a terrible wheelchair; I was pushing her around . . . .

I have learned so much about myself and people in general from being friends with Emily. She's a great friend to have. She's a positive person; she's definitely a reliable person, so you feel that strength of having that person in your life. But above and beyond that, the things that I have learned just about not being so selfish about certain things that I have in my life, having some things in my life, the benefit—it is hard to describe what you get out of being friends with Emily. It's a blessing really.

When Emily needs that extra push I give to her and when I need it she gives it to me.

Emily's experience on the trip resulted in

a feeling of independence, and with that trip, it was my first independent trip on my own with a friend from Edmonton, so it was a growth experience for me, for both of us, and I learned a lot about myself from that trip. I can take trips on my own, think on my own without having to rely on family, without having to rely on somebody else to be there. It was an experience that I will never forget because it allowed me to be normal—quote, unquote, “normal.” And with my family, I have to rely on my family, and now this took me away from the whole reliance on family and put me in what able-bodied people do, put me in that scheme of things.

Sally commented on the value of the relationship of Emily and Alethea:

That genuineness, being able to be yourself, not having to hold anything back, not worrying about being judged, not being able to do something like anyone else can, the fact that it's okay that she [Emily] is difficult to understand at times and she doesn't want to have to worry about that with Alethea, that it is very normal.

### ***Video Information***

In this section additional video information is revealed. This information provides another layer of understanding for the researcher, through information that may not otherwise be evident.

Other video footage than the interviews revealed Emily and Alethea's friendship and continual communication with one another. The bond between them is obviously very close. It is also evident that Emily is self-reliant, however, there is also a protective element in Alethea's friendship with Emily. This is evident as she remains in very close contact with Emily's motorized wheelchair, as they enter the building together. Alethea smiles and reassures Emily. There is a relaxed camaraderie evident between them. When Emily talked about the conference that they attended together, with obvious excitement she expressed it

as a life-transforming experience. The excitement is evident in her facial expression and tone of voice. The additional information reinforces, that the time they spent together, at the out of town conference was important to them, both in their relationship with one another and in their own lives.

The friends communicate in similar ways. Their hand gestures reveal a level of confidence and determination about who they are, what they hope to achieve, and what they are saying. They are self-assured about their ability to communicate and find joy and happiness in their communication with one another. This reveals how much they like being with one another, and is expressed in laughter.

They looked to one another in the interviews for assurance and support. When Alethea was emotional, Emily too became emotional off camera; they respond to each other empathetically. At that moment Emily learned more about what the trip meant to her friend, and she was able to understand Alethea on another level. This further understanding of their conference experience impacted both participants.

Sally too revealed competency, fluency, and a depth of understanding about her knowledge of the friendship and its attributes.

# FRIENDSHIP THEMES

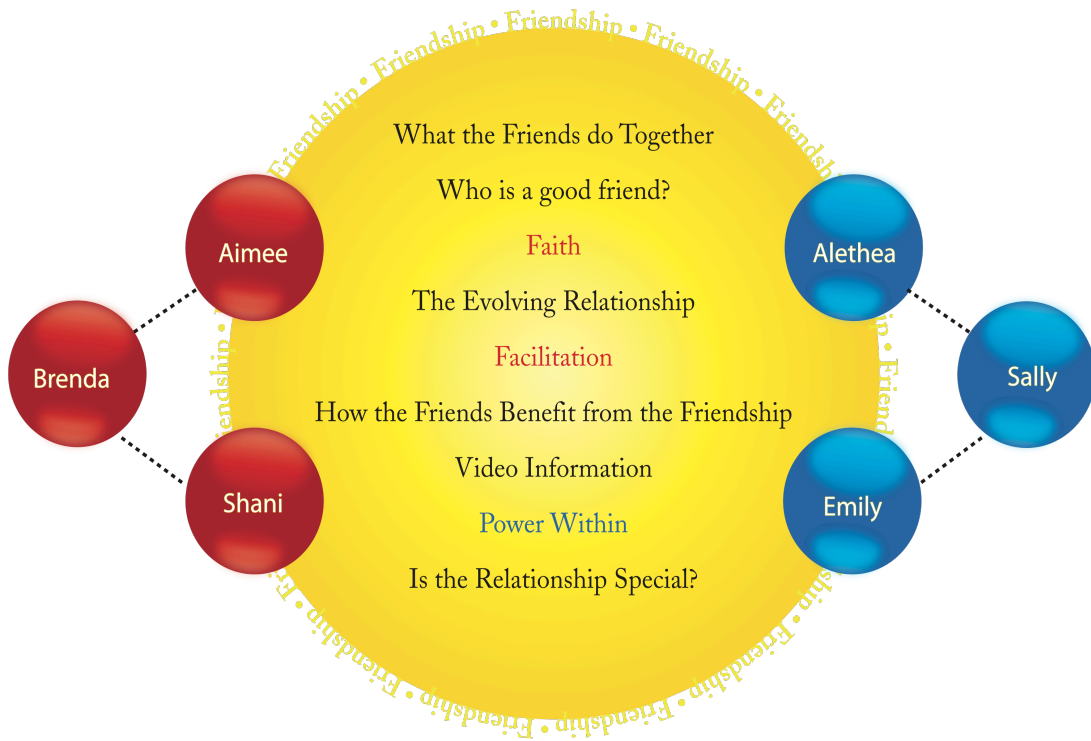


Figure 3. Friendship themes

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS**

At the beginning of the study I posed a number of questions to determine the nature of the friendship between individuals who have a developmental disability and their nondisabled peers, and I will now discuss some of the themes that arose from our interviews and the similarities and differences in these relationships as well as relationships in general. It is particularly noteworthy that the young people in the friendships offer a glimpse into their world from their perspectives, which I distilled into short videotapes. I also explore other areas that are central to an understanding of the nature of the relationships, such as the complexities, intangibles, and traditional notions of friendships. Finally, I investigate the contribution of the role of the medium to the understanding of the nature of the friendships that I have featured. In conclusion, I examine how these findings contribute to understandings of friendship and make specific recommendations for additional research.

### **Friendship and How It Feels**

When I asked Aimee and Shani to describe how friendship feels, they answered in ways that were similar to the way that any friend would respond.

Shani explained that a friend is someone she can

enjoy being around and be happy to be around. You can feel safe with and laugh with, and just enjoy the good things that come about in life even without being able to say anything. A friend is someone you can just be around and be happy to be around.

She also described the trust between friends. Aimee reported that she is “glad” to be with a friend. Furthermore, friends talk to her, cheer her up, give her a hug when she is sad. These responses are no different from what one would expect to hear in an interview with any two friends.

Emily and Alethea echoed these responses. Emily explained that

a friend is somebody you can trust who is fun to be around, who is honest, who you can just be yourself around and not hide anything, and be the person that you really are. A good friend is someone who listens to you, who is trustworthy, who you give your opinion to, and they will listen to you and they won't judge you on it and will be there for you and give your support to you and whatever you want to do.

When I asked what friendship means to her, Emily replied:

Friendship to me is being able to be yourself—honest, open, and sharing your feelings, whatever they may be at the time. Sharing your true feelings towards your friends and being able to have a blast and being able to have a great time with one another.

Alethea described friendship as

so many different things. Friendship plays a different role in your life. It can be having someone to rely on, having someone to motivate you, having someone to go shopping with. It fills so many different things. It is such a human experience to have someone to connect with. Ultimately, friendship is just another kind of connection. You have your loving connection with your life partner, with your parents, your siblings, your children; I think it is another one of those connections in life we have to have.

The participants' descriptions reveal some similarities among these relationships. Friends “hang out”; they talk, share, and offer support to one another; and they have fun together. A genuine sharing and a valuable youthful perspective are also evident in their relationships. This sharing takes many forms in the activities that they do together, but it is also apparent in their philosophical



attitude toward each other, which both pairs of friendships reveal in their discussion of the role of friendship in their lives.

Alethea feels “different around Emily. I feel refreshed; she is smiling and a sweet friend. She is kind. The snow is gone and life is good and the birds are chirping.” This speaks to Emily’s ability to laugh in the face of difficulties and to just be herself. They also share an ongoing playfulness, happiness, and joy. For example, in the prelude to their interview, Aimee and Shani talked about “getting” the other person while they were washing Aimee’s hair. Aimee said “I got you,” and Shani agreed: “Yes, you did.” Obviously, Aimee enjoyed “getting her good.” In this aspect of their relationship they interact in a way that is consistent with having fun and getting along with each other.

When I asked Alethea for details on what she meant when she said that it is one of the connections in life that “we have to have,” she asked me to think about what life would be without friendship, and I could then understand why it is important to her and Emily. However, it is poignant that persons with disabilities often face life without friends, which underscores the importance of the relationships that I discuss here as examples of the many friendships that exist in these friendship dyads. “Unfortunately, students with severe disabilities often have fewer opportunities to develop friendships and less social savvy than do the typical adolescent” (Hendrickson et al., 1996, p. 26).

### **Friendship Defined**

Many people have defined friendship in many ways. However, each of us has our own experience with friendships and therefore our own understandings of

our relationships with others. Largely subjective in nature, our experiences are also defined by external realities such as with whom we are friends, the circumstances of the relationship, and whether the general outcome of the relationship is positive or negative.

Others' collective experiences of friendship cannot define all friendships. If we do not fit into the mould of what others consider friendship, the nature of the experience is no less than that of other friendships.

### **Propinquity**

Additionally, the friends represented here are educators of various kinds. They attend classes together in an inclusive environment at postsecondary colleges. Aimee audits her classes, and the other three participants have been, or are, also enrolled in courses. Inclusive education at college and university presents an opportunity to bring persons with various disabilities into contact with nondisabled peers in an environment that in the recent past has been closed to individuals who are not academically inclined. This somewhat disparate aligning of people results in an interesting dynamic that changes the mix of college and university populations and adds to the diversity of human connections. It is an important alliance for both groups, and high school students have described it as a desired diversity. As one high school senior stated, "I have the right to experience human diversity in my school" (Fisher, 1999, p. 62). He explained that a lack of contact between people with disabilities and people without disabilities leads to further segregation and discrimination. This meeting place is very different from those that have brought people together in the past. The

proximity of people to one another is important, although it is not enough to think that because people are in the same place, they will form relationships. Attitudinal barriers remain fixed in many ways: “Previous researchers (e.g., Gill, 1996; Olkin, 1999) have shown that attitudes toward having relationships with PWDs [persons with disabilities] become increasingly negative as the relationship deepens and the severity of the disability increases” (Miller et al., 2009, p. 10). Conversely, the results of a substantial middle and high school student survey show that students generally believe that they can have positive relationships with peers with severe disabilities (Hendrickson et al., 1996, p. 6). Furthermore, if inclusive opportunities are available at this and other educational levels, people will continue to meet others. If educators work to bridge attitudinal barriers and the limits that those barriers place on relationships, students and youth will find new ways to break through them. It is also important for people with various challenges to be in an environment in which they too can make worthwhile contributions. Inclusive educators play a crucial role in the bringing students together and promoting dialogue and understanding among them.

### **Complex Boundaries**

When Shani and Alethea ask themselves “Do friends do this?” the similarities between their relationship and others are evident. They have been in situations in which boundaries not usually associated with friendship were challenged. For example, Alethea asked herself “Do friends do this?” late at night after a session at the conference when Emily’s helper had gone and she found herself assisting Emily in various ways. Shani too assessed her relationship with

Aimee: “That counts as friendship to me.” Friendship in general involves common experiences. However, it is also obvious that each of us can describe our own experience and understanding of our relationships with others. We can usually identify aspects of our friendships that are common with those of other relationships, but if we cannot, the relationship is no less an experience than that of other friendships. This aspect is characteristic of the dyads in this study. Certainly in Aimee and Shani’s relationship Shani has assisted Aimee with many tasks, but that seems to have strengthened their relationship. In a study of the characteristics of friendships between someone with a disability and a nondisabled peer.

the top three reasons students gave for being friends were altruistic in nature (e.g., “They need friends too,” and “I like to help people”). Between 55% and 65% of the respondents also indicated that they themselves would benefit from these friendships (e.g., “I would feel good about myself” and “It could be fun. We might have common interests. I could learn about disabilities”). Green et al contended that positive relationships measured by how much one invests and receives in return (i.e., altruism) are better viewed as “friendship-like” On the other hand, Green and Schleien (1991) points to altruistic motivation as an early stage in friendship formation, which therefore should not be dismissed as a nonexemplar of friendship (Hendrickson et al., 1996 p. 26).

Human beings demonstrate a basic altruism in our relationships with others.

Although they might not necessarily define them as altruistic, friends may embrace these values under the umbrella of friendship.

### **Purpose**

The commonality in both of friendships, which both Shani and Alethea, respectively, identified, is that friends “help us to become more than what we are right now” and “[make us] better versions of ourselves.” These friends

acknowledge the positive aspects of their relationships and the way that their friends help them to become better persons than they were before they met. Shani knows that she has helped Aimee to achieve some of her goals. Brenda commented that, “cognitively, in a deep emotional level for Shani, Aimee has touched her life in a meaningful way.” She added that in future interactions Shani will be able to tell her students that they can reach their potential and, instead of limiting them, she will be able to say, “Yes, yes, they can.” What is also evident is that Shani has been able to move beyond her feelings of frustration and open herself up to becoming more than she was previously. Although Shani noted that “Aimee felt the same way: . . . [She] did not like me,” she too grew to like Shani and they developed their friendship from that point.

As human beings we may consider purpose as significant and central to our experience of happiness in life. The participants in this study also identified this sense of purpose within their friendships. Shani and Alethea articulated it in essentially similar ways. Shani said that “each one of us has a purpose,” and Alethea thought that “each kind of friendship serves a different purpose in your life.” For Alethea, the purity of the friendship is that it is “soul feeding” and the “friendship of pure love, understanding, . . . and nonjudgment.” The friends have a sense of this underlying purpose, and it is a positive aspect of their relationship. Furthermore, they do not believe that it is only their relationship that has purpose in their lives, but that it is common to relationships in general. This philosophical outlook and the underlying belief permeate everything that they do. This also gives meaning to the friendship that they share and to their other relationships.

### **Beliefs and Value**

The relationships that I describe in this study involve beliefs and values that are common to both people in each friendship and between the pairs of friendships, yet they are singularly unique. Within these friendships is an understanding that there is something beyond where the friends are now and that more is possible, that they have transcended limitations; they work together and alone to achieve their goals. For example, Shani thought that Aimee's achievements surpassed others' expectations of her when they continued to work on them. The important point is that they worked together to overcome the various challenges that they faced to reach higher goals, but they also faced a very serious challenge that they needed to overcome together, which was their ability to work together. Shani overcame her challenges, and her relationship with Aimee developed into a deeper friendship.

The same can be said for Aimee, who has had to struggle to overcome her resistance to working with Shani. To overcome the various challenges their relationship faced, they have had to surpass their limitations. This ability speaks to friends' tenacious efforts within these relationships to continue undaunted in the face of difficulties and not to give up. Their efforts have also helped them to grow in their capacity to love and gain wisdom. Emily and Alethea also believe in their ability to transcend their current limitations and difficulties. The participants in the study all believe that their friends have helped them to become better people.

### **Notable Differences**

There are also notable differences within the friendships. For example, Aimee and Shani began their relationship when Shani was employed as Aimee's support worker, and they attended college classes together. Emily and Alethea met at school when Alethea volunteered to take notes for Emily. Aimee and Shani have been in their relationship for two years and Emily and Alethea for six years. Now, however, Shani lives in a different city from Aimee, and Emily and Alethea have not changed their locations. Over time the relationships have developed and evolved.

### **Facilitation**

An important element in Aimee and Shani's friendship was the need for support and facilitation. A positive change occurred within their relationship that Brenda, Aimee's mother, nurtured. She realized that the relationship needed support, and she made every effort to improve it. Pivotal moments occur within relationships that can be significant turning points, and each of the dyads pinpointed when those moments occurred. Brenda facilitated Shani's relationship with Aimee when she arranged for Shani and Aimee to get together for a sleepover at Aimee's house and just be themselves, with no goals in mind. This relaxed atmosphere strengthened their friendship.

Parents can play an important role in developing their children's friendships. Parents should be included as part of the interdisciplinary team in school because they can offer a great deal to the understanding of the person and his or her needs and desires. This partnership should be welcomed and honored at

all stages of life because others who have facilitated relationships have confirmed that each contributes something different to addressing those needs (Sutherland, 2004). For example, someone I know asked high school students who had a truck to pick up someone with a severe disability, take him to school, and drop him off at home every day, and he offered to buy these students new tires for their truck. Consequently, this person created a bridge to bring people together.

### **Paradigm Shift**

Through this “paradigm shift,” that Brenda created for her daughter Aimee, Shani tried to “learn how to get along,” and “open her heart” to Aimee and to the situation, with which both young women were feeling frustrated. This also fostered a change in Aimee that helped her to open up to Shani and begin to welcome her further into her life. This shift resulted in a deeper friendship between the young women.

Aimee and Shani required support at a crucial point in the development of their friendship. The best person to facilitate a relationship is the person who knows both people and is willing to become involved—possibly a teacher, a student, or a community advocate. The student respondents in Hendrickson et al.’s (1996) study contended that they should be the primary people to take the responsibility for facilitating friendships; and then special education teachers, youth clubs, the parents of students with disabilities, and, finally, the parents of students without disabilities. In the case of Aimee and Shani, Brenda, Aimee’s parent, took the step forward to make the situation more positive. The kind of support required to enable this change may seem counterproductive to the



development of a natural relationship. However, relationships of all kinds need help from time to time. Strategies to help relationships stay together may include the following: (a) evaluating the problem, (b) suggesting different ways to approach within the relationship, and (c) bringing people together in a positive way to foster change. From the point at which a paradigm shift occurred in Aimee and Shani's relationship, Shani described the friendship's blossoming and "matur[ing] like any friendship."

### **Defining Moments**

Emily and Alethea did not require any apparent facilitation; however, the friendship went through a defining moment which in turn made their friendship stronger and deeper. Emily explained:

We went to Toronto together. It was a life-changing experience for both of us. Because of this experience, I believe that it has made our friendship stronger than it was before. It was a life-changing experience; it made us stronger. On the trip we got the chance to see who we really are as people that we don't normally see in everyday occurrences.

Alethea began to understand Emily's daily experience better:

Emily talked a lot about our trip to Toronto, and it really was a life-changing experience to do that, because when Emily asked if we could be roommates for this trip, I was scared because I thought, Oh my God! She probably has all these things that she needs help with, and I don't know if I can help her with that stuff! And that is a very intimidating thing, because as much as she is going to be independent, where does that put me? Are we friends, or how much help do I have to give her? And sharing a room together and seeing the everyday challenges that she has to face and going beyond myself and getting beyond those fears. I don't know if I can help her. And you sort of think to yourself, I am going to help one of my friends get dressed. It seems so outside of that comfort zone and doing that, so put me back in my place and really opened my eyes. I have so much respect for her having had that experience. I wish everyone could have an experience like that.

Alethea also said that the experience “put [her] back in [her] place.” When I asked what she meant, she replied:

Well, just taking things for granted; like, What do you think when you go to bed a night? You think about the stuff you have to do in the morning. And thinking that in my mind and actually physically helping Emily into her bed really opens your eyes.

If Aimee and Shani, and Alethea and Emily had not experienced these difficult or pivotal moments, their friendships might not have developed as they did. The difficulties triggered the change and growth that needed to occur. In any relationship it is difficult at times to know which changes occurred first to enable other changes, but it is evident that when inner changes occur, other, outward changes follow, and deeper relationships result.

The elements of change that occurred within the relationships are not uncommon to relationships in general. Friendships of all types change and evolve. However, it is important to reiterate that friendships require support from time to time to succeed. This is also true of relationships in general, however, it was crucial to the development of the friendship dyad of Aimee and Shani. Although Emily and Alethea’s relationship was not facilitated, their defining moment occurred when Alethea realized the difficulties that Emily encounters every day. Defining moments can be significant turning points.

### **Challenges**

The challenges that these young women face because of their disabilities make certain aspects of the friendships different. However, these challenges make the relationships what they are and do not have to be dwelled upon as

insurmountable in developing a good friendship. It is important that differences not be emphasized but, rather, that attention be drawn to what educators must do to help young people as well as people of all ages who have disabilities to develop relationships and friendships with peers without disabilities. It is not true that people who have difficulties such as intellectual impairments and physical challenges can have relationships only with others who have similar needs. This is a limited notion of friendships. Lutfiyya (1991) found an exchange and equality between people who were happy to be in relationships. She reported that

it was once held that the people most likely to be friends with individuals with learning difficulties are others with the same impairments. Whether this is consciously stated or not, many researchers believe it to be true, and then examine only this type of relationship. (p. 2)

Those who think that persons with disabilities must have relationships only with others like them may continue to marginalize them, and they are doing a serious injustice to that person and others.

### **Intangibles Aspects of Relationships**

Shani spoke of “intangibles” that she was unable to describe adequately.

This intangible is part of her definition of friendship:

I can't give you words, though I usually like words. There are no words for me to put a finger on this friendship that feels that it's older than we are, that we were friends somewhere before. So we have a bond and a unity that just exists.

Brenda explained that this is a part of their faith that they share. Shani considered it a “normal” relationship, but something in the friendship felt different to her in some indescribable way. It is something that fundamentally draws us to another person who might become more than an acquaintance. This also speaks to

something that is indescribable about relationships in general. It is possible that there is a deeper connection and awareness of something that friends share that is not easily discerned in friendships that Shani described. Relationships may have some intangible element that brings people together. In Sally's description of friendship and her thinking about what developed between Emily and Alethea, she thought that something "clicks" in friendships in general. Specifically, she felt that something took place between Emily and Alethea. Although it is not easily articulated, perhaps what is inherent in relationships is that aspect that is somewhat intangible in nature. What Sally saw in Emily and Alethea's relationship is that it is no different from any other genuine friendship. This unknown element may be a factor that cannot be overlooked in determining who is a friend and how friendship feels. However, what we have in common may draw us to another person, and it may be the values that friends share.

It may be too that the commonality creates support and shelter from the difficulties that they face in their relationships, which results in another level of common understanding. Other aspects and complexities of these relationships can best be described by illuminating the benefits of the relationships to both friends.

### **Benefits of the Friendships**

These friendships demonstrate the partners' willingness to be open to living life and to making it as good as possible while they develop their true potential. There is also a serious side to the friendships because of the difficulties that they face daily, but the sheer joy that they feel is also evident. There is much laughter, they are close, and they share with each other. These are important

aspects of the friendships because not all people strive to reach their full potential, yet these friends do.

All of the friends feel that they are better people than they were before they met their friends. Seeing how Emily continually strives and transcends difficulties inspires Alethea. Both young women are intensely interested in personal discovery and growth, and they find that within their relationship they support each other as they work toward self-actualization, as Alethea described it. Personally and together they strive to be the best that they can. They work to make the impossible possible, which was evident in their firewalking at the conference. However, that is not the only activity that has helped Alethea to grow and “become a better version” of herself; watching and interacting with her friend has also inspired her. Although Alethea understands Emily’s physical fragility, she admires her friend’s indomitable spirit.

Alethea also inspires Emily. The sharing that occurs in both of the friendship dyads may be missed with a superficial understanding of the friendships.

This kind of growth to become a better person occurs in friendships of all kinds. However, these partners became better persons because of their friendships and the realization and awareness that there is something more in the other person that needs to be seen and understood. That notable characteristic, whatever it is, inspires them. Brenda understands that whatever connects Aimee and Shani energizes them and brings them joy. The same can be said of Emily and Alethea.

The pairs of friendships reveal the shared values, beliefs, and connections that drew them together.

Brenda acknowledged that Aimee's self-esteem has grown tremendously, and she takes great joy in and looks forward to her mornings with Shani and appreciates that Aimee and Shani share the simple things in life. It "energizes the two of them, and that's a powerful part of the friendship." Brenda also considers what Aimee has gained transferable because of her increased confidence and the "successful meaningful connection to other building and networking of relationships—and not that they are in her life every day, but all of our relationships aren't always like that." For Brenda the relationship "has brought peace to her heart." That Aimee has had such a "positive experience from [the relationship] allows her to have confidence in exploring and broadening her world."

Furthermore, Alethea feels that Emily knows her, and they have fun together, and she considers the friendship a "distraction" for her. This is important because it exemplifies the strength of the friendship. In general, giving strength and support to the other person is always part of a good relationship. This strength is evident not only in this relationship, but also in the friendship between Aimee and Shani. It is clear in Shani's admission that she missed Aimee when she left to attend school in another city. It is also evident that this is not just a one-sided relationship, but that it is based upon reciprocity. Brenda noted that Aimee will suddenly say, "I like Shani." When Shani moved away to go to school, Aimee found it hard to be without her and missed her when she was "gone."

### **Inspiring**

As I mentioned earlier, all kinds of people inspire us and, conversely, are inspired by us. The challenges that Aimee and Emily face are awe inspiring. It seems that they have overcome so much to get to where they are today, and inherent within the participants is the will to move beyond that. This was evident when Shani decided not to give up on her friendship with Aimee and when they overcame the challenge that they encountered early in their friendship. It was also evident when people in the medical profession told Brenda (Aimee's mother) that Aimee would not develop beyond a certain point early in her life. Brenda, however, had the courage to help Aimee to achieve many things and more than what was expected of her, and Shani also helped her to overcome her challenges. Perhaps the people who encourage us to become more than who we are, are the very people who model this achievement in the way that they live. These friendships offer an even better perspective on how to live our lives. We can learn from the contributive aspects of the young women in these friendships. These contributions need to be passed on throughout the school community and the postsecondary education environment, and leaders and educators as well as society need to acknowledge these contributions. The evident qualities are strength, courage, and perseverance.

### **Traditional Notions of Friendships**

Questions that need to be answered are: Are there other paths or new ways into relationships? How do relationships begin? How do friends meet each other? The answers to these questions are important to our understanding more about the

relationships themselves. They give us insight into what we can do to provide more opportunities for people to develop relationships. We need to ask what we as a society and educators can do to help persons with disabilities. How can we alleviate their feelings of loneliness and isolation? We have to explore other ways of providing opportunities for friendships to develop. What is interesting about the two friendships that I have featured is that they began in what we might consider not a natural way, and then developed into true friendships.

In Aimee and Shani's relationship, Shani was a support worker for a year. Initially, and for a short time, Alethea volunteered to take notes for Emily. However, although there have been other support workers and other note takers, none of the relationships developed into friendships as the participants described them. Why then do friendships develop and others not in similar situations? Most important, what can we as educators do to help?

### **Significance of the Study**

How can our role as educators assist in friendship development? This is a fundamental concern. In both of these friendship dyads, inclusion and inclusive postsecondary education were factors. In inclusive schools, colleges, and universities, some with disabilities remain isolated and friendless. Pertinent questions are, Why? What is it that educators are not doing? What can we do to make it better? What makes these relationships develop beyond an acquaintance stage, whereas other relationships in inclusive environments do not develop into friendships? How does friendship begin with any two people? The participants in this study help us to understand and create dialogue as we strive to create



inclusive communities. Within schools, teamwork and collaboration in a solid interdisciplinary team help to tackle these problems. If there is a will to make it happen, it will happen (Sutherland, 2004). Beyond that educators must play their part as they assist in the development of friendships, through collaborative learning strategies, peer supports and creating positive climates of belonging. In secondary and postsecondary the need to work in tandem with students who are learning how to collaborate and with a diverse student population is of the utmost concern. As educators we must model for students our respect for individual differences and for all on an individual basis in our classrooms. Unfortunately, these practices may not occur as they should.

The existing human resources within the tremendous diversity of schools today that includes persons with disabilities also need to be valued. The need to cherish and value each individual as having something to offer others also must be emphasized. If we devalue people who can make contributions, we devalue our schools and communities. Furthermore, we need to be able to see that every person has something valuable to give to others and to discuss what those contributions are from the earliest school year and onwards. To a certain extent this dialogue has begun. Perhaps schools can ask students and educators, What is a contribution? What are the core values that we hope to embrace? The people in this study have given us some of the answers: “She has taught me to be a better person,” “I have learned how to build better friendships in general,” “I have learned not to take things for granted,” “I have learned how to be a better

teacher,” “I have more confidence in myself,” “I have gained strength from being in this friendship,” and “I am so glad that I chose to build this friendship.”

Obviously, in all relationships we share something that draws us together; it is the same for the friendships featured here. The participants now have friends in common, and they have been involved in inclusive educational environments. We cannot put into words the intangible that they share. Aimee and Shani have the same faith and a shared interest as educators; they like being together; they have fun and share much laughter.

This friendship has shown Shani how to

build friendships with people in general, and it also has made me a better friend to the people I live with and the people that I come into contact with, because I have learned how to build a friendship that we had a choice to build . . . or just work together, and I am so glad we chose to learn how to build a good relationship. So it’s amazing.

Shani said that this is a direct result of her interactions with Aimee. Shani talked about how she feels around Aimee: “I like how I feel when I am around Aimee. She has a very friendly and loving personality, and she puts up with me even when I am bossy.” The differences and challenges that people at all levels in school share in their diversity make us more interesting. Of course, we want students to compete to raise the bar of excellence, but that needs to include everyone in school and society, not just an elite few. Is it not better to learn from one another and incorporate that experience into our knowledge base so that we can lead the way for others who do not value people with disabilities in their schools, communities, and societies? Individual competition has been a part of our educational makeup, but now the ability to work together collaboratively is

integral in many professions. We see that this is the way that we can make a real difference in the world of others and ourselves. It is time to be involved in a “humanitarian competition,” (Ikeda, 2009, p. 9).

Emily and Alethea are connected by their passion of self-discovery, as well as through educational concerns of various kinds. They enjoy their time together. In their relationship too are the laughter and joy that is evident between them. Some aspects of friendship bind them that are not uncommon to any relationship. However, these commonalities that the person who has a disability and the nondisabled peer share are not readily apparent. Both of these relationships demonstrate that commonalities cement the underlying foundation of their friendship, and this must be understood and emphasized in a positive way to others. Beyond that very powerful foundation of sharing something in common with another person is a shared purpose within these friendships. Furthermore, the friendships are based on underlying beliefs and meet the needs of the friends, which propels them to another level.

A question that may be asked is whether nontraditional relationships can result in genuine friendship as much as a more naturally occurring development through social networking? It did as these friends are concerned. These relationships have developed into what the participants described as friendships. The friends will also willingly have the friendships develop and took the necessary steps to enable this to happen. Judging relationships based upon restrictive criteria may limit the way that friendships develop. Then we have to define friendship on how it started, how it all began, and the way into the relationship rather than the

feelings that the two people have developed for each other. Sally described Emily and Alethea's relationship as no different from other friendships. She repeated this to reinforce that Emily and Alethea share a relationship that is formed on qualities that are very natural and genuine. However, the notion that only certain people belong in a certain place, as in a segregated classroom, is shifting and evolving, as are our ways of forming relationships. Who could have considered the alternate ways into friendships that are being created now? The ways into our relationships, how we find one another, and how we develop our relationships are changing rapidly. Where people with disabilities live, with whom they spend their time, what they are doing, and how they are educated are also changing and, of course, need to continue to change even more.

Where will the friendships be in the coming years? These relationships speak for themselves. They are reciprocal in nature, and the friends give and receive love. To consider someone's capacity for friendship based upon limitations of intellectual, communicative, and physical abilities as in some way not capable of friendship is a limiting notion based upon discriminatory views of what people with disabilities cannot do, cannot be, and cannot achieve.

Aimee and Shani have known each other for two years, and Emily and Alethea have known each other for six years. It is difficult to determine how long any relationship will last and whether the depth of the relationship will pass the test of the rigors of time. Will the friendships endure? Where they will be in the next few years is unknown. At this time and through this gateway these people are in relationships. The analysis has revealed that all of the participants believe that

they are in genuine friendships, and they all hope that their relationships will continue.

The nature of this study was to intensively inquire about the nature of friendship. The limitations of this study are is that there is no basis to determine whether what was shared is common to other friendships. The size of the study also limits generalization.

Does the medium (videotapes) contribute to our understanding? It is clear that the medium of the videotape allows us to see the friends interact with one another in ways that reveal that they are very happy to be in the relationship. Without a videotaped interview, it might be difficult to discern that happiness. The videotape reveals gestures and nonverbal cues that otherwise would not have been seen. As Aimee has an intellectual impairment, the audiovisual aspects of videotapes add to our understanding of their friendship. For example, Aimee's voice clearly portrays that she understands what Shani is saying and responds accordingly. Without an audiovisual medium, her tone of voice would not have been perceived by the researcher. It is an understanding and knowing of Shani that Aimee has acquired that she might not have been able to convey otherwise. This familiarity and resulting reciprocity is evident in their interactions with one another. They are both at ease to ask what they need from each other. Also, Shani helps and directs Aimee in various ways. The objectives that they have together assist Aimee's abilities, give her choices and develop her language skills. Beyond these objectives and described as an evolving relationship the participants develop their friendship. Underlying the daily activities that they are engaged in together

is the development of their friendship. Evident within their friendship is the bond that has developed between them. In their interview Aimee and Shani were videotaped simultaneously, and Shani was therefore able to help Aimee to feel more comfortable and contribute further to the interview. Pairing the two friends illustrates how comfortable they are together and what they have built together through the creative activities that they do together (such as tending their garden to make it blossom, much like their friendship). Although in an audiotaped interview the participants might describe their relationship, it is more readily seen and understood on videotape.

Within the dyad of Emily and Alethea, Emily has a good communicative ability, and a typical cognitive function, but a videotaped interview, allowed me to discover more, and revealed an enriched understanding of the nature of their friendship. Friendship is difficult to completely render into words, for anyone, and to add to another layer of understanding yields further insight within this dyad. The videotaped interview with Emily and Alethea shows their shared joy and the nonstop communication between them when they are together. I interviewed them separately, but the video also shows their interactions, and where they also reveal more about their friendship in a natural way. Most people on camera will self-edit, as in most interview situations, but capturing friends interacting reveals more of who they are together.

There is a shared determination seen in how the two participants express themselves, in their hand gestures, which emphasize what they say. There is sincerity and an emotional openness shared by Alethea. This open perspective

allows the researcher to understand more deeply their shared experience. It provides a richer understanding of Alethea's experience with her friend on their trip together and what Emily goes through daily. Interestingly, when Alethea is behind Emily's motorized wheelchair it is as if she pushes it, but of course she is not. Through that perspective I understood that they share a strong companionship. I could see that they are close and comfortable with one another and through shared glances the depth of their friendship is obvious. Like many friends, they are similar in their expressions and common goals. Sally described it as a natural friendship with all of its attributes of shared understanding and inherent supports.

Also, the interviews with the friendship dyads demonstrate each person's awareness of what the other is thinking about and her reactions to her friend's answers. The person may look to gauge the other person's reaction or to look for some understanding from the friend. The camera did not seem intrusive at any point in the interviews, and it may well have been attributed to the crew size, which consisted of only myself and the camera person. It is also a credit to the participants, however, because they were able to compose themselves, and having the questions in advance allowed them to converse as naturally as possible.

Videotaped interpretive interviews offer a much rounder view of the friends as they are together and on their own, and they gave me an additional perspective beyond speech and what can be conveyed into another dimension and a multilayered understanding of the nature of the friendships Eisner (as cited in Creswell, 1997). With this understanding we can discover more about the

perspectives of the youth of today, their experiences, and what they identify as the most valuable aspects of their experiences; and we can suggest to others what needs to be done to make the interactions more positive and fulfilling and dispel the feelings of loneliness and isolation. Dialoguing and listening to these participants as they talked about their friendships have helped me to understand and recommend actions for others to develop these kinds of friendships.



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**APPENDIX A:**  
**INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. Where did you meet each other?
2. How long have you been friends?
3. Who is a friend?
4. What makes a good friend?
5. Can you describe what you like about the friendship?
6. What do you do together?
7. Can you think of something that you can tell me about that happened in your friendship that makes it special in some way?
8. What do you like about the other person?
9. What do you like about the relationship?
10. What is it that you share with one another?
11. What is friendship?
12. Where do you want to be in your relationship in two years?

**APPENDIX B: INFORMATION LETTER, CONSENT FORM,  
RELEASE FORM, AND SAMPLE CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT**

Dear Potential Participants:

I am a graduate student in the Department of Educational Psychology at the University of Alberta, and I am writing to ask if you would be interested in participating in a study that I am conducting for my Master's degree. The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of friendship between a young adult/adolescent person with a developmental disability and a nondisabled peer.

In the study a basic interview will be conducted which will involve both people in the friendship and this interview will be video taped. Participants will be recorded separately. Their interview will last approximately one half hour to forty-five minutes. After one week, I will ask the interviewees to review the video tapes together with the researcher for a second look at the interview. This will be done to verify the data collected and as well read accurately any cues or gestures that may be involved. Also, I will ask the participants to make a scrapbook together, which will involve drawings, pictures, photographs, text, poems, that portrays their friendship. Also, a teacher, counselor, friendship facilitator will be asked to comment on the friendship from his or her perspective using relevant segments of the video or by viewing the scrapbook.

There are risks (please see below) associated with this study and your choice to participate in the study is voluntary. The results of the study may be used to suggest ways to facilitate relationships between persons with developmental disabilities and nondisabled peers. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. All information obtained during this study will be kept partially confidential. All information will be coded and stored in a locked secure location for five years following the study, before being destroyed.

Results of the study will be shared through publication in my Master's thesis, research journal, conference and possible website broadcast/internet viewing.

The plan for this study has been reviewed for its adherence to ethical guidelines and approved by the Faculties of Education, Extension and Augustana Research Ethics Board (EEA REB) at the University of Alberta. For questions regarding participant rights and ethical conduct research, contact the Chair of the EEA REB c/o Betty jo Werthmann at (780) 492-3751. If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at (780) 433-0563 or by email at las9@ualberta.ca . My supervisor at the U of A is Dr. R. Sobsey and he can be contacted at (780) 492-3755.

Sincerely,

Lorna Sutherland

## Consent Form

(Keep this portion for your records)

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read and understand the information letter regarding the study entitled "Friendship in Dyadic Relationships Between a Young Adult/Adolescent With a Developmental Disability and a Nondisabled Peer." I agree to participate in this study. There is video taping, interviews, and a scrapbook. I have received a copy of the letter describing the study and this permission slip is for my own records.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Guardian/parent, signature is required regardless of age of participants. Please sign here that you agree to the conditions stated above and to the above permission/consent form for the individual to be a part of the study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Printed Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

\*\*Please note that a permission/consent form for the video portion of this study is included and must also be signed by participants and by their guardians/parents. Please see the release form below.

Release Form

With full consent I hereby authorize \_\_\_\_\_ and the University of Alberta to make and reproduce such audio and/or visual recordings of me, whether by still photograph, motion picture film, videotape, website broadcast/Internet, or for use at educational conferences, or other mechanical device as may be available to record my interview. Also, the scrapbook may be used, for further illumination of the nature of the friendship.

I acknowledge that all such recordings are the sole property of the University of Alberta for its general use and educational purposes.

In signing this form, I hereby release the University of Alberta/Lorna Sutherland, its representatives, and all successors and assigns from any and all liability, demand, or damage claims of every nature and kind arising out of or connected in any way with these recordings.

Parent/Guardian signature is also required.

Subject Title:

\_\_\_\_\_

Date:

\_\_\_\_\_

Location:

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_

(Print Name)

(Signature)

(Date Signed)

\_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian:

\_\_\_\_\_

(Print Name)

(Signature)

(Date Signed)

Witness:

\_\_\_\_\_



Release Form for Video to Be Viewed as Podcast/Webcast Internet Viewing

I hereby give my full consent to release the video footage acquired during this study entitled “Friendship in Dyadic Relationships Between a Young Adult/Adolescent With a Developmental Disability and a Nondisabled Peer,” for webcast viewing.

Participants and Parent/guardians must sign.

Participant:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Print Name)                      (Signature)                      (Date Signed)

Parent/Guardian:

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Print Name)                      (Signature)                      (Date Signed)

### List of Potential Risks Associated With Podcast/Webcast/Internet Viewing

1. Public viewing of images/footage and therefore no control of who may download those images.
2. Risk of being recognized by viewers who may or may not agree with what you say.
3. Being open about what you think and say can lead to criticism.

### Confidentiality Agreement Sample

This form may be used for individuals hired to conduct specific research tasks, e.g., transcribing, interpreting, translating, entering data, shredding data.

Project title:

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I, \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_  
(specific job description, e.g., interpreter/translator) have been hired to \_\_\_\_\_.

#### I agree to

1. keep all the research information shared with me confidential by not discussing or sharing the research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) with anyone other than the Researcher(s).
2. keep all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) secure while it is in my possession.
3. return all research information in any form or format (e.g., disks, tapes, transcripts) to the Researcher(s) when I have completed the research tasks.
4. after consulting with the Researcher(s), erase or destroy all research information in any form or format regarding this research project that is not returnable to the Researcher(s) (e.g., information stored on computer hard drive).
5. other (specify).