

The Friendships and Social Relationships of Students with Complex Communication Needs In and Outside of Special School Settings

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Short Abstract

Friendships and social relationships are central to our wellbeing, where those with wider and closer networks have better mental and physical health. However, the friendships of those with the most complex needs are often ignored. This study explored the friendships and social relationships of students with complex communication needs (CCN) in and outside of special school settings, to understand how they view and experience them and how to facilitate them. 20 participants – six students, eight of their parents and six of their teachers/teaching assistants took part in the research. The research was carried out in two stages – stage 1 included semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers and unstructured observations of students in class and at breaktimes. Stage 2 included direct work with students through a Mosaic approach, using six participatory tools – pyramid ranking activity, preferred activity with friends cards, best friends activity, school tours, collections from home and book-making. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was employed to analyse data. The findings included eight themes. Findings suggested 1) students with CCN know their friends best, 2) friendships are maintained through a connection that goes beyond words, 3) reciprocity in friendships means no distinction between ‘helper’ and ‘needing help’, 4) barriers include communication limitations and the protectiveness of parents 5) parents facilitate friendships through dedication to their students’ social lives and sticking within their communities, and 6) teachers facilitate friendships through structured and incidental friendship opportunities alongside an inclusive school ethos. Implications for schools and various professionals are discussed.

Long Abstract

Friendships and social relationships are central to our mental and physical health – having friends increases social status, reduces vulnerability to social aggression, promotes emotional well-being, provides companionship and social support and helps with school transitions. Thus, for wellbeing, learning to make friends is a key developmental task. However, the friendships and social relationships of those with complex communication needs are often ignored. Students with CCN have fewer friends and interactions than those without disabilities due to lack of proximity and meaningful contact. Although alternative and augmentative communication systems (AAC) support communication, AAC users still experience challenges interacting with others and have difficulties developing friendships. Little is known about the friendships of CCN populations, despite it being one of the shortlisted research priorities identified by adults who use AAC.

This study explored the friendships and social relationships of students with complex communication needs (CCN) in and outside of special school settings, to understand how they view and experience them and how to facilitate them. 20 participants – six students, eight of their parents and six of their teachers/teaching assistants took part in the research. The research was carried out in two stages. Stage 1 involved semi-structured interviews with parents and teachers and unstructured observations of students in class and at breaktimes. Interviews, lasting approximately an hour each, were conducted in school or online on Microsoft Teams with parents and teachers to establish their views of the students' friendships and social relationships. Interview questions were predetermined but the order depended on participants' responses. Observations were conducted in class and during breaktime to gain a snapshot of the actual interaction patterns of students with CCN and to supplement data from interviews and participatory data from students. Each student was observed twice (30 min each)—once in class and once at breaktime. Stage 2 involved working with students through a Mosaic approach, using six tools—pyramid ranking activity, preferred activity with friends cards, best friends activity, school tours, collections from home and book-making. Communication partners were part of the direct work and helped to facilitate communication between the researcher and the students. A reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to analyse all the data through a six-phase process, where each stage was distinct yet recursive.

The findings included eight themes – three student themes, three themes across parent and teacher data, one parent theme and one teacher theme. Findings suggested 1) students with CCN know their friends best, where they had the most accurate views of their social lives compared to adults in their lives (teachers and parents), hence, to help improve their quality of life, researchers and practitioners must listen to their voices on all matters that concern their access to quality education. Furthermore, while adults focused on the students' friends being the 'right level', students sought a good friend who was fun and easy going. The differences in perceptions between students and adults emphasise the importance of asking students about their friendships and what they look for in a friend; 2) friendships are maintained through a connection that goes beyond words, where students with CCN found different ways to enact meaningful social contact to maintain friendships, including through physical proximity. Within the school curriculum, students need opportunities for meaningful social contact through physical activities as well as music and art. These subjects should therefore be as important as the traditional 'core' subjects; 3) reciprocity in friendships means no distinction between 'helper' and 'needing help', hence researchers and practitioners should actively challenge the discourse around students with CCN as 'needing help' and move beyond communication to examine friendships, which lie at the heart of 'functionality' for these students; 4) barriers include communication limitations and the protectiveness of parents; 5) parents facilitate friendships through dedication to their students' social lives and sticking within their communities, and 6) teachers facilitate friendships through structured and incidental friendship opportunities alongside an inclusive school ethos.

This study has contributed to new understandings of what the friendships of students with CCN are like by gathering views from the students themselves, through the Mosaic Approach which privileged their voices, placing them at the centre of research. This study has provided new thinking around how the students know their friendships best, how their friendships are established and maintained, highlighting the importance of meaningful social contact and what it entails, barriers to friendships and how adults facilitate friendships. This study supports the call to pay attention to how inclusive education is experienced by these students and what quality education provision means for them, where schools should adopt a friendship mindset, moving beyond explicit interventions to consider if the students have time to choose and

interact with whomever they want, as such friendship choices fall within the realm of choices that students with CCN can make on their own. Overall, this study shifts the focus away from what society thinks students with CCN's friendships are like, to what the students themselves think they are like, and suggests improvements for quality of life by continuing to listen to their voices, to ensure research is not done 'on' but 'with' them. As researchers and various professionals supporting these students, we need to continue to consider ways in which the politics of special educational needs are constructed in different school, family and academic contexts, to find ways to include these students by listening to their voices and shaping goals of education that are meaningful to them, and not compound society's failure to include them. At the end of the day, they are very much a part of our worlds, as we are theirs.