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Abstract

A Circle of Friends is a group of people providing support for a person who is unable to obtain set goals by him or her self. Their involvement is based simply on a wish to support a fellow human being and the focus is the relationship of the person to others and the community. The article describes the development of a circle of friends for a student at a secondary school in Queensland. This is a very practical guide to how the actual process works, some of the issues involved in the running of the program and some key aspects to the success. **Keyword: Friendship**

A Circle of Friends:

A Social Support and Advocacy Structure

Lesley Murphy and Brian Storey

A Circle of Friends is a group of people providing support for an individual who is unable to obtain set goals by him or her self. Their involvement is based simply on a wish to support a fellow human. This paper outlines the development of a Circle of Friends for a student integrated into a secondary school setting in Queensland.

Within society today the integration of people with a disability into the regular community reflects the general trend towards social Justice for all people. Marks (1989:11) argues that *"integration is not an event, but a process of growth, development and change."* It does not happen by just being together. This is a view supported by Roberts, Pratt and Leach (1991). It will only be accomplished when there is *"interaction and interdependence between all members of the community."* (Fullwood, 1990: 10).

Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are being integrated into regular school settings (Biklen, 1985; Booth and Swann, 1987; Stainbeck, Stainbeck and Forest, 1989). For many of these students this means adapting the ideas and expectations which they have learnt in their special school or special education environment. Belle (1989) cites examples of research by Cohen and Syme, 1985. Gottlieb, 1981; Sarason and Sarason, 1985 which have shown that social network characteristics and social support resources impact on the copying and adaptation of children. This knowledge is significant when one considers that a major problem faced by students with disabilities when integrated into regular classrooms is the lack of friends and peer support. Biklen (1985:18) refers to these students, who often are shadowed by a teacher aide upon whom they become dependent, as *"the island in the mainstream".* The lack of opportunity in engagement of prosocial behaviour, combined with their lack of knowledge in this area in a regular setting will impede the social development of these students (Espiner, Wilton and Glynn, 1985, Hudson and Clunies-Ross, 1984). Matson and Ollendick (1988: 1) state that *"the degree of social skill is directly related to the number and type of prosocial acts performed by others toward the person evincing social behaviour",* The importance of social skills has been well documented. The lack of these necessary skills, inappropriate behavioural excesses, and problems with interpersonal relationships result in

• low social status among peers;

• low participation rates in activities, both in and out of school;

• few friends; and

• increasing loneliness and isolation in school.

All of these may contribute to problems, which may be carried into adult life.

A key factor to success in the integration of students with disabilities is the development of informal peer support groups and friendship, the social and educational value of which schools often place little emphasis upon (Strully and Strully, 1988). Educators such as Forest and Lusthaus (1989, 1990) and Stainback and Stainback (1988, 1990) argue that these support networks are not just options but necessities within an inclusive school.

One way to build relationships between regular students and a student with a disability is through a 'Circle of Friends' (Snow and Forest 1987). The development of this concept provides a process through which regular students can become involved in the life of an integrated student. It allows for an opportunity during which both parties can grow and develop socially while working within a support network.

The issues put forth by Strully and Strully (1988) need to be stated at this point as it will be seen that the concept of a support circle revolves very much around them. They are:

· relationships develop in ordinary places with ordinary people,
· work is needed to develop relationships;
· every person is endowed with talents and these must be used for the benefit of all;
· friendships are changeable;
· friendships work for both parties;
· friendships are on a voluntary basis;
· friends are individuals; and
· friends are different from each other.

The 'Circle of Friends' concept satisfies many of the criteria suggested by Perske (1988) as necessary for developing peer support and friendship. Villa and Thousand (1988:146) argue that:

Peer support networks are effective because the peer buddies are active in school activities and have a social network and therefore can facilitate the introduction, inclusion, and active involvement of students who typically might not be invited or volunteer to participate in a non-academic school function.

The establishment of a support Circle is simply an invitation for students to come into the life of another person who needs their particular concern and friendship to grow and develop. Any student can respond because it is a response to an individual not to a specific need which therefore requires a specific type of person. The purpose of the Circle is not defined too precisely in order to obtain a mix of students. If it is explained as a response to a disability, only those who feel they have something to give in relation to this need will come forward. Others may feel that they have nothing to offer when it is really a case of offering nothing but friendship.

Establishing A Circle

Circles can be established without a facilitator. However there are many reasons why a support person is needed to initially facilitate if the concept is to achieve maximum benefit for both the student and the members of the circle. However, as Vandercook and York (1990:112) propose, this person should "fade if and when appropriate." An effective facilitator is one who:

·   has the respect of the school community;

·   has the support of those in charge;

·   is a good listener, and

·   has faith in children's ability to be responsible and communicative.

Stainback and Stainback's (1990:47) description of support facilitation, organisation and co-ordination of resources *"into a comprehensive support network-* are important elements of their role. Ruttiman and Forest (1986:24) state that *"the integration facilitator breaks down the social, developmental and educational barriers stacked against a student with challenging needs".* The Circle's facilitator would have a primary focus on the first of these barriers.

The facilitator invites class members to join the new Circle. The first meeting begins by telling them about the student in a way that helps the student talk about what he or she wants. The students respond with suggestions about how they can do things together and what problems may arise. The facilitator encourages them to carry out their projects and supports their own problem solving. Meetings are not formalised and the facilitator needs to be attuned to the group to foster a sense of when and how the meetings should be conducted. Because the group themselves have ownership and control of their own Circle, meetings do need to be regular. The students need to be working out the dynamics of the circle constantly. They need to talk about the problem - settings that handicap the opportunities for the person with a disability to participate in the fullest way possible.

It should be noted that it is not the student with the disability that is the focus of the support group, but the relationship of that person to others and to the community. The group supports the relationship and not the person. If the focus is on the person, the tendency of the group will be to help by doing things for the person rather than enhancing their ability to develop relationships and providing opportunities for building friendships and acceptance.

As the Circle members come to know each other, they become friends, some close friends. The discussions that occur in the support Circle meetings reveal the character - personality of each to the other. Through the Circle there

evolves a whole new set of dynamics that embrace the members themselves. By having the opportunity to learn and grow up together, students who do not have disabilities will develop a willingness and the competencies to facilitate the participation of their peers who are disabled (Meyer, McQuarter and Kishi, 1985). The revelation of self that support circles foster and the gaining of a deeper insight into others, a dynamic that perhaps happens in no other school experience, leads to close and trusting friendships within the Circle's members. The personal growth of each person in the Circle may spin off to the other networks, which operate in their lives. Positive attitudinal changes in members that are detected by parents and teachers can be a by-product of the support circle process.

This concept of support has a substantial tradition emanating from the life of Judith Snow and her friendship with Marsha Forest. There are now many documented Circles of support throughout North America and Australian families and schools are taking it on board. In most cases people with disabilities other than intellectual ones are able to state their vision for the future to the Circle. In other cases where students may suffer from a severe intellectual disability, parents or caregivers may instigate the formation of a Circle to support them in their decision-making process and aid future direction for the individual.

Whether the Circle of Friends is formed for a student or an adult, the agendas for meetings are very similar (Mount, Beeman and Ducharme 1988). The first meeting will:

·   introduce the circle members;
·   discuss current patterns;
·   clarify the ideas for the future;
·   brain-storm strategies for action;
·   record obstacles and opportunities;
·   make commitments for action;
·   and set the time and place for the next meeting.

Follow up meetings will.

·   review commitments from the last meeting;
·   have members report on progress;
·   brain-storm new strategies;
·   record obstacles and opportunities;
·   make commitments to action;
·   and set time and date for next meeting.
The planning accomplished at these meetings differs from the previous types of planning for people with disabilities.

Methodology

Pre-entry

Prior to the commencement of the project, permission to conduct the study was obtained from the parents of the student being supported, the principal and the support teaching staff. A suggestion was made by staff that certain students should not be included even if they were among the volunteers. The reason given for this was that these boys were reported to be behaviour problems in class and would not be good models for a student who was having difficulties with his social behaviour.

The student who was considered in need of support as identified by staff was then approached and approval for his involvement obtained.

As it was felt that the strongest support would come from class peers, an explanation of the concept was given to the targeted class during a form period from which the identified student was absent. Students were asked to consider over the next week whether they wished to become involved in the project. From this a group of six boys volunteered.

Participation and Setting

· **Student to be Supported**

The support network was established for Greg in August 1992 at the Western State High School. At this time he was 13 years old and enrolled in year 8. His previous education had been at a Special Education Unit in the grounds of one of the Primary feeder schools. He has an intellectual impairment, which is the result of microcephaly. Academically he is not on the same level as his peers. However, there is variance in individual facets of his ability, e.g. he shows aptitude in problem solving and exhibits a reasonable level of competence in year 8 German. His written language and numeracy skills would be comparable to that of a student in lower to mid-primary school. During his first semester at high school, Greg was withdrawn from subjects such as Mathematics, History and Science.

Although he has the skills to travel to and from school on public transport there are many independent-life skills that he has not yet acquired, e.g. money management and time management. While he is not physically disabled Greg does exhibit problems in both fine and gross motor skills evident in his poor handwriting and his slightly uncoordinated gait.

Greg's bright personality makes him a likeable teenager. This is reflected by the way that the general student body has accepted him and his difference to some degree. His acceptance is confined and qualified by his inappropriate social behaviour. This is brought about by his inability to differentiate behavioural responses in different social contexts both in and out of the classroom. An example cited by staff was the occasion when, after observing older students kissing behind the tractor shed, he entered the classroom and tried to kiss one of his classmates. An observation made by the students was that Greg did not realise the inappropriateness of his expression of friendship. Instead of saying to a fellow male classmate, "I am your mate", his use of the

phrase "I love you" was evidence to them of his inability to respond in a socially acceptable manner.

· **Students Participating in Circle**
Number participating:　　6
Age range:　　　　　　　12 to 14 years.
Primary feeder schools: 5

Common factors: form class, other siblings in their family, interest in sport outside of school.

Among the six volunteers were the three boys whom staff had suggested not be included. However their inclusion in the Circle, a decision made by the researchers, provided an opportunity to evaluate the benefits, if any, on all members, of the circle.

· **Setting**
The intention was to conduct regular meetings in an annex of the school library. However it was envisaged that when and where possible the session would be transferred to a more social venue. Irrespective of where the meeting would be held, the seating arrangement would always conform to the circle concept.

The frequency of meetings was flexible. It was contemplated that during the first few weeks they would be held on a weekly basis. As the relationships developed, it was thought a fortnightly interval between gatherings might be a more suitable time span. Because of the participants' commitments during school hours and those of the facilitators, it was decided that lunch hours would be the most convenient time for all concerned.

Evaluation Themes

· **Recognition of Greg's Difference**
During the Circle of Friends meetings the boys made the following comments: *"He doesn't have control over his behaviour"* and *"We know when not to do it, Greg doesn't".*

· **Acceptance of Greg's Behaviour**
Then the issue of Greg stealing bags was being discussed, one boy's response was" I think he does it for attention "but another suggested that," He *does it because he wants friends".* When referring to the excursion planned for Greg's birthday (a group trip to the movies), one boy remarked "My *parents will let me see anything but Greg's mightn't".* After the excursion one group member said. *"Greg was a bit loud but that was to be expected."*

· **Support Provided by Members**
Another theme that came from discussions with teachers was that some individual members of the Circle were supporting him in class. Greg himself has recognised the support the boys have given him in class.

· **Social Skills Improvement**

There was general agreement by the teachers interviewed that Greg's behaviour had improved throughout the year.

Some Emerging Findings

Four major findings resulted from the project. There are indications of a general improvement in Greg's social skills and social behaviour. However, the extent to which this improvement is a function of the support Circle cannot be accurately determined at this stage. It would seem that his attendance at a regular school and the role models provided by his peers throughout the year have had a definite impact on his socialisation. Second, the security provided by the Circle's structure is acknowledged by Greg's eagerness to have the support network continue next year and his belief that the boys can support him in discussions and personal problem solving situations. The next finding relates to all Circle members. The boys saw the benefit of the Circle not only in terms of Greg's socialisation but their own social development and enjoyment. This was substantiated through observations made by researchers and teachers. Finally, as the boys are organising an outing after the conclusion of the project, it appears that there has been a strengthening of the friendships between Greg and the Circle members.

Rationale for Recommendations

Although as Roberts, Pratt and Leach (1991) state, *"One of the major aims of integration is to provide students with disabilities with opportunities for interaction with and social acceptance by students without disabilities",* it must be emphasised that there is no guarantee that the ongoing process of socialisation will develop purely because the child is integrated, particularly in terms of students who have undergone different processes of socialisation in different educational settings. Hickson (1990:148) argues that socialisation has been viewed as a one-way process directed by parents, peers, and schoolteachers. She defines it as *"an on-going interactive two-way learning process".* The importance of school as a major element in the development of the socialisation process in students is recognised by Stainback and Stainback (1990), Vandercook and York (1990), and Schaps and Solomon (1990). However as these educators argue, proximity in a regular classroom is not the only ingredient that produces friends and relationships. The recipe must include mechanisms that enable interaction between peers. In this way relationships based on Hickson's interactive process, are built. Such relationships, Howarth (1987-114) claims, are of *"two-way benefit and promote a social dimension which is worthy of development."* The Circle concept seeks to generate friendships in line with this model.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on our experience of facilitating this project we would strongly advocate that the following be considered by school personnel when establishing a Circle of Friends for students with a disability.

1. The facilitator should be a member of the school community. It is important that this person be familiar with.

·   the school climate;

·   school activities and calendar;

·   the members of the Circle;

·   the class teachers involved; and

·   the parents of students in the Circle.

This enables full advantage to be taken of events and situations, before and after they occur.

2. Regular, on going contact should be maintained with group members. In the early stages of development of the Circle, discontinuity of contact due to events such as school holidays and relocation of members due to illness impedes the momentum of the group. This may not be as important as relationships within the group strengthen.

3. Development of the Circle should be viewed as a long-term project. School personnel need to be prepared to maintain a high level of support to Circle members for at least one year until members are mature enough to maintain the Circle in a more independent way.

4. The notion of support networks becomes an integral part of the school curriculum. School communities need to investigate the feasibility of incorporating the idea of support networks within their Human Relationships Education curriculum. The Circle concept would be seen as one such network.

5. Meetings need to be held in a variety of settings. After the establishment of the Circle, it is useful to vary the settings in order to provide flexibility of approach and stimulus to the participants, and encourage group cohesion by allowing members to plan where and how future meetings will be held.

6. Open communication is required between the facilitator and other stakeholders such as teachers and parents. In order to maximise the 'spin-offs' for all Circle members; there is a need for the facilitator to be supported by teachers in the school setting and parents in the community. This will be accomplished only if the facilitator actively engages in communicating in a two way process.

7. Membership of the Circle needs to be flexible. Members must feel free to move in and out of the Circle, reflecting the nature of everyday relationships. Friendships established by the supported student outside the Circle may provide an extra dynamic in the group.

8. The Circle must support all of its members. Whilst the building of relationships with a person with a disability is the underlying purpose of the concept, there needs to be a built-in flexibility to adapt the model to service the needs of all group members as the occasion arises.

9. Type of service will vary depending on the nature of the disability. The features of the support will differ depending on the individual being supported and their disability.

Conclusion

Lipsky and Gartner (1989:258) argue that policy, including the education of students with disabilities, is often influenced by images such as the media's portrayal of persons with disabilities as *"either heroic individuals or pathetic cripples rather than human beings with a multiplicity of qualities."* Furthermore, they suggest that society's deeply ingrained attitudes on persons with disabilities hold true for special education. In this setting students with disabilities are given little ownership of their lives and few opportunities to make decisions. They argue that:

Having denied individuals with disabilities autonomy and decision-making authority - in effect, denying them the respect given to people whom society respects - we then excuse their behaviour, ascribing it to the disability (Gartner and Lipsky, 1989.258).

The concept of a support network such as the Circle allows an individual to control his or her own life with a degree of support from within the Circle and therefore gain self-esteem as well as the respect of the community.

The eagerness shown by Greg to continue the circle is consistent with Sherif and Sherif (1964:49 in Semmens, 1988) who claim that *"a sense of belonging to a reference group, developed through social interaction, gives direction and purpose to the striving of an individual".* The Circle of Friends provides for students, a stable base on which *"intimate social ties"* can be formed in an environment of mutual support. This mutual support taps into one of the main but under-utilised resources in schools today - the students. Building Circles and involving students means, "*sharing power with them, giving up your authoritarian and patriarchal system so inherent in most schools."* (Forest and Lusthaus, 1987: 10).

Fulcher (1989:5 1) states that one objective which is consistent with a policy based on human rights and a comprehensive education, is contained in defining integration as "*a process of increasing the participation of all students in the social and educational life of regular classrooms."* The circle of friends, as a social support structure, could be used as a strategy in the achievement

of this objective. In trying to achieve goals in social education, teachers have often looked "for natural ways to present issues and interpret experiences or events" that students without disabilities may never have experienced (Biklen, Corrigan and Quick, 1989:211). The Circle may be used as a forum in which students learn to interpret each other positively and therefore derive mutual benefits for all. In order to obtain these gains, it is important that Circles encourage the support of students based on equal friendships and not that which comes out of a sense of duty to provide help and kindness (Howarth, 1987).

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