

# Teachers as Friendship Facilitators

## *Respeto and Personalismo*

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**"Danny has no relationships outside his family."**

**"Jessie has no friends at school.....She has only been there one and a half years."**

**"My dream is that the phone will ring, and someone will invite her to play."**

These quotes are from parents of students with disabilities who lament the lack of friendships in their children's lives (Turnbull & Ruef, 1997, pp. 216, 218). In interviews with 17 parents of children, youth, and adults with problem behavior, over two-thirds of the parents described the absence of even one friendship. A parent of a young adult, whose son had never had a friend, warned: "The older you are and the longer you wait, the more difficult it becomes" (Turnbull & Ruef, 1997, p. 218). To address this critical need for friendship, parents of students with moderate and severe/profound disabilities indicated that approximately one-fourth of the school week should be related to friendship/social relationship development (Hamre-Nietupski, 1993).

Despite the parental interest in friendship, special education practitioners have emphasized academics, functional skills, employment, and independent living (Sowers, Glang, Voss, & Cooley, 1996). What little attention has been paid to social relationships has primarily focused on (a) developing isolated social skills (Pray, Hall, & Markley, 1992) and (b) providing peer tutoring and assistance to students with a disability (Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, Berryman, & Hollowood, 1992). Neither emphasis necessarily leads to reciprocal friendships.

Even though most schools have not strongly emphasized friendship development – by allocating specific times for it in educational programming – both special and general education teachers have indicated that friendships between students with and without disabilities are possible and benefit all those involved. Further, many adults, including teachers, counselors, school psychologists,

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social workers, and parents of students with and without disabilities can be friendship facilitators (Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Shokoohi-Yekta, 1994; Hamre-Nietupski, Hendrickson, Nietupski, & Sasso, 1993). These potential facilitators could perform any of the three strategies that Schaffner and Buswell (1992) have identified in their facilitation framework:

1. Finding opportunities – bringing children and youth together.
2. Providing interpretations – acknowledging individual strengths and commonalities among peers.
3. Making accommodations – introducing necessary changes to enhance participation and interaction.

This article highlights three teachers who were actively involved as friendship facilitators by illuminating their use of Schaffner and Buswell's friendship facilitation framework with three students with moderate/severe disabilities.

### **Three Teachers, Three Students, Three Facilitation Strategies**

In a large study involving 11 Hispanic children and youth with moderate to severe disabilities, we interviewed a total of 57 people, including the students, parents, teachers, and other professionals. For this article, we focus on only three of the eight teachers who participated in the research. We selected these three teachers based on two characteristics. First, they believed that friendship facilitation was an important part of their job. Second, they acted on their belief, whereas some of the other teachers confirmed that they and the school made little or no effort in this area. Table 1 reports the interview constellation for three Hispanic students that we used to gain information on each teacher's friendship facilitation.

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**Table 1. Description of Participants**

Teacher	Child/Youth	Type of Disability	Friend(s)	Interview Participants
Fernando Arias	Roxy	Cerebral palsy Mental retardation	Saúl	Arias Roxy Roxy's mother Saúl
Charles Fields	Danny	Mental retardation	Jason Yolanda	Fields Danny Danny's mother and father Jason Yolanda
Luis Delgado	Angel	Hearing impairment Learning disability Behavior disorder	Daniel	Delgado Angel Angel's mother Daniel

Following are the three teachers who stood out for their friendship facilitation roles:

- Fernando Arias – Hispanic high school vocational education teacher of special and general education students.
- Charles Fields – African American sixth-grade language arts teacher in general education.
- Luis Delgado – Hispanic community tutor/mentor for students with emotional disabilities.

All three built upon the Hispanic cultural values of *respeto* – respect for human dignity – and *personalismo*, which relates to personal integrity and places value on personal attributes that make one a good person (Marin & Marin, 1991). It is interesting to notice that despite being non-Hispanic, Fields' ethnic background also had similar values, from which he drew in his interactions with students.

Their involvement as friendship facilitators, another commonality, focused on different strategies of Schaffner and Buswell's framework. Arias primarily emphasized *finding opportunities* for Roxy, whereas Fields emphasized *providing interpretations* for Danny. Delgado illustrates the synergistic use of all three strategies—finding opportunities, providing interpretations, and making accommodations.

### Arias: Finding Opportunities for Roxy

To foster friendship, Arias highlighted the importance of maintaining a respectful school and classroom climate. He praised his school philosophy that provided a context in which people with the most different backgrounds were allowed to be together, interact in a respectful manner, and learn from each other:

In our school, our philosophy is that we treat everybody the way we'd like to be treated... Our school is a unique situation where we have pregnant young ladies who go to our school. We have special education children. We have the regular kids, and we have the drop-out recovery program ... we're all equal. We all have an equal chance. And we have members of every gang at our

school, and we hardly have any fights, and there are close to about 300 gangs in our city. We all get along. It's one big family unit it seems like. So it's a unique situation.

Arias encouraged Roxy, age 19, to join a school club affiliated with the Vocational Opportunities Clubs of Texas that he sponsored. His suggestion for Roxy to join extracurricular activities demonstrated that he cared about the teenager and her family. As a student who had been segregated in a special education school for most of her life, a club enabled Roxy to have an opportunity to interact with students without disabilities. Arias frequently highlighted Roxy's strengths – he reminded Roxy and others that she was a natural-born leader, outgoing, friendly, and able to communicate well with others.

### Friendship Snapshot: Roxy, Tony, and Saúl

Roxy attends a neighborhood school for a couple of hours each day. In this inclusive setting, she has made friends through her leadership in the high school's Vocational Industrial Club of America. Fernando Arias, club sponsor, "would always brag about me," said Roxy, a student praised by teachers for her verbal and leadership skills. That's why Tony, Arias' nephew, first became interested in Roxy. Now Tony spends time with Roxy practicing for club ceremonies.

As the only girl in the club, Roxy receives more than her share of male attention. Saúl stays close to Roxy ready to fetch a soldering iron, move a chair, or whatever else he can do to make it easier for Roxy, who uses crutches. In return, Saúl says Roxy "treats me so nice." The two also study together.

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Arias also organized a full range of weekend activities, besides the ones during the school day, to enhance bonding. On several occasions, Arias extended an invitation to participate to Roxela, Roxy's twin sister, and Ms. Cofresi, Roxy's mother.

Every weekend we [Arias and club members] get together and do something. We are either hiking; you know I get them involved, but try to once again make that bond stronger

#### **Friendship Snapshot:**

##### **Danny, Jason, and Yolanda**

In fourth grade, Danny's mother invited a group of Danny's fellow students to start a Circle of Friends. Through that Circle, Danny met Jason, who calls himself Danny's "bodyguard," always watching out for Danny. Jason takes his self-appointed role so seriously that he asked to be in all the same classes as Danny. In response, Jason said, "Danny makes me feel good when I am in a bad mood."

Danny has that effect on their classmate. "The smartest kids are drawn to him probably because they realize that by helping others they help themselves," said Danny's teacher. "It gives them self-esteem because they are a role model."

Yolanda, another original Circle member assists Danny outside the classroom when he forgets where his locker is. She helps him find it, then he pats her on the back and tells her that she is his best friend. They often eat lunch together.

amongst each other, because I feel that's very important. Just bonding and becoming good friends, I think that helps anybody out.

Sponsoring the club and encouraging students with disabilities to participate added more to his already heavy work load, but Arias rationalized:

I enjoy being around children; that's why I do it, because I like kids. I always have. I wish everyone else would, but some people see it, "Oh, well, I have to go in Saturday and do this," and I don't see it like that. I'm not doing it for myself. I'm doing it for them.

#### **Fields: Providing Interpretations for Danny**

As a foundation for friendship facilitation, Fields relied on his own family experiences. His parents had taught him to respect differences and to find qualities in every person. He stated:

I grew up in a situation where my parents taught me not to judge people by the way they look and the way they act... I mean, as long as it wasn't a negative type of behavior, you should accept people.

As Danny's teacher, Fields established a respectful class environment on the first day of school. Introducing Danny to his class, he pointed out, "There are obvious differences between us all." To illustrate, he indicated that some of the class "dressed funny"; others have different aptitudes for learning. Therefore no one needed to poke fun at anyone.

To reinforce his philosophy of respect and acceptance, Fields treated Danny like any other student, and the class followed his lead. He consistently "interpreted," or affirmed Danny's strengths. He described Danny as having more manners and etiquette than other kids his age, with no behavior problems, and as being "hard not to like." Because he saw so

many of Danny's strengths, Fields believed that the youth had just as much chance as anyone else for friendships:

Danny has his dreams; I'm sure he does. You know even though he can't express them right now

Fields expressed a strong belief in the synergistic power of the collective effort for goal achievement. "You need to get as many people involved as you can to make your own dreams come true." To provide a setting in which his students could grow, Fields often drew on the resources of his fellow teachers.

I don't try to do it all myself. I work with other teachers, and we get together and we modify lesson plans. If I have a particular problem, I go to the person who is the expert.

#### **Friendship Snapshot:**

##### **Angel and Daniel**

Basketball reintroduced Angel to Daniel, who is also from Puerto Rico. Their families knew each other from the neighborhood, and practicing basketball together led to other shared interests. Together they ride bikes, play Nintendo games, and talk about what is happening in the neighborhood. Their favorite activity is performing rap songs in front of a mirror.

"We laugh, goof around," Daniel said. "We put hats on. Be silly. We enjoy ourselves." Since Angel considers himself an expert in rap music, he often gives Daniel advice. He picks out songs with the right beat for Daniel and suggests different vocal arrangements.

"Of all the friends that I have, I prefer being with him," Daniel said of Angel. "Even though he's younger than my friends, I get along better with him because it's like I can do anything. I can say anything. It is okay with him."

Despite the positive aspect of group reliance, Fields expressed awareness of the dangers of too much help. His major concern was the tendency of Danny's friends and classmates to help him too much and, thus, for Danny to overrely on them. He explained that often, when he asked Danny questions, other classmates did not give Danny sufficient time and provided the answers for him. "I say, 'No, no, no, I'm asking him. I want to know what he's thinking.'" This attitude confirmed Field's perception of Danny as a capable person despite his slowness to verbally express his ideas. "I see ideas in his eyes." To be heard or listened to, Fields said, is when self-esteem really takes off.

### **Delgado: Finding Opportunities, Providing Interpretations, Making Accommodations for Angel**

After his father's death, Angel exhibited severe behavior problems that required his hospitalization for several years. On his return to his community, Angel's educational team determined that he wasn't ready to return to the typical school environment. Through a special project operating in the school system directed by a Hispanic community organizer, Luis Delgado started working with Angel as a tutor and mentor. Delgado worked with Angel in a one-to-one situation from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. daily at home. Angel then attended an adult education center where a certified teacher instructed him from 3 to 5 p.m.

Unlike most professionals who perceived Angel as a "problem," Delgado found the opposite. He explained that Angel's strong dislike for Anglo women stemmed from his experiences in hospitals, where he had gotten "...the short end of the stick." The educators also demonstrated little or no respect for

him. Confronted with this situation, Angel displayed challenging behaviors and lacked friends.

Behind Angel's defensive attitude, however, there was a person with "a lot of talent" and a "capable student." Delgado provided interpretations of the youth's behavioral challenges by putting them in the most positive light.

So he's a pain in the butt sometimes, but he's a real nice kid. He's really good. He has respect. He can act out, but he acts out with control. He acts out with me. He'll curse at me or question my authority and stuff like that, but then he knows how to come back because I told him that it's okay to get angry at people.... It's what happens after the argument that we have to be cognizant of.

According to Delgado, his success in working with Angel lay in expressing a keen interest in him. This teacher emphasized that his actions, more than his words, clearly demonstrated to Angel how much he cared about him. Delgado offered authority tempered with ample amounts of respect and follow-through, "because he's had a lot of disappointment in his life and let-downs."

Aside from building trust in their relationship, Delgado tried to expand Angel's quantity and quality of social interaction opportunities as a precursor to friendships. He encouraged Angel's involvement in community activities. They spent a lot of time on the street, in the malls, and at the YMCA, where Angel could play with adult men. Once Angel learned to play a contact sport with grown-ups, Delgado reasoned that his next step would be to do that successfully with peers.

Friendships with youth his same age had presented difficulties for Angel because of the gangs and drug problems in his

area. Delgado made an effort to convey that not everybody was necessarily involved in those activities.

I think one of the reasons he has a hard time making friends is because we have a gang and drug problem, so he's under the impression that a lot of kids are in gangs and involved in drugs; either using or selling them....But I want to get him away from that train of thought ... so he can understand that there's lot of kids that are involved in sports and some real good activities.

A peer that Delgado frequently included in their activities was Daniel, Angel's neighbor. The time spent together allowed Angel to put into practice his social skill repertoire so that there would be a greater likelihood that his relationship with Daniel would cement into friendship, and these skills could serve to find other potential friends.

Conflict management was among the skills Delgado taught Angel. To avoid conflict in the first place, Delgado encouraged Angel to make accommodations by not staring at people in a menacing way and by using more appropriate language and fewer curse words. He also tried to teach Angel to "cool off" when tension builds up before there was an aggressive outburst.

Delgado's impact on Angel's life manifested in different ways. The youth made significant academic, but most important, social progress. Daniel expressed that Delgado contributed to strengthen his friendship with Angel. Angel's mother declared that her family would suffer a great loss if Delgado should leave one day.

### **Attaining Friendships**

In examining the teaching styles and preferences of three teachers, we have found that schools should match "friend-

ship facilitation" strategies that are comfortable and possible for teachers with the priority needs of students. In giving students *respeto* and *personalismo*, there is room for a variety of strategies—no matter how busy we are. In our larger study, the mother of one of the students, not featured in this article, commented on whether she felt that it was possible for her daughter's teacher to help facilitate friendships:

Phyllis was mainstreamed to her school, and we had a hard time getting her in; and I feel like they [teachers] feel like it's hard enough just trying to have her in the class and teach her. And I feel like if they have to do anything more, to me it's like it's just too much work.... So I don't want to go and ask for anything more, because I don't want them to be upset with my daughter and take it out (on the child)

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### **Creating respectful classroom climates provided a responsive context within which friendship could flourish.**

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Our hope is that friendship facilitation will not be considered an "extra" but rather an integral part of both special and general education, as it is for these three teachers. When we checked back with Fields over a year after our initial research, he affirmed our conviction that teachers' "unspoken responsibility" of facilitating friendships leads to more enriching educational experiences for all. He gave us an update on Danny — and on the classmates who learned to care for him:

I want you to know that Danny is doing well in school. His vocabulary and reading skills continue to grow.... Last week he said something for the first time that I will never forget. I handed him an assignment; he looked at it for a few seconds and said, "Mr. Fields, this is easy."  
He is not only speaking for himself, but thinking for himself as well. I also wanted you to know that I'd previously thought that teaching another person to care was next to impossible —

I have since learned that the way you teach a person to care is to get them involved. It really works!

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#### **Read More About It**

Amado, A. N. (1993). *Friendships and community connections between people with and without developmental disabilities*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.\*

For ordering information: P. O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285; 410-377-9580.

The 20 chapters of this book focus on dimensions of friendships, stories of friendships between people with and without disabilities, and the strategies for building friendships. Examples include school-age, as well as adult individuals with disabilities.

Meyer, L. H., Park, H. S., Grenot-Scheyer, M., Schwartz, I. S., & Harry, B. (1998). *Making friends: The influences of culture and development*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.\*

For ordering information: P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285; 410-377-9580  
This extensive resource provides theory and research on children's friendship; issues and examples of friendships at the childhood, early adolescence, and adolescence to young adulthood life stages; reflections and perspectives on developing a sense of belonging; and ideas for future directions for friendship research. The 22 chapters are comprehensive and timely.

Moon, M. S. (1994). *Making school and community recreation fun for everyone: Places and ways to integrate*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.\*

For ordering information: P.O. Box 10624, Baltimore, MD 21285; 410-377-9580.  
This book includes 12 chapters that focus on how you get started in developing a community recreation program, legal/technical supports, issues associated with ages and settings, and overviews of model inclusive programs.

Schaffner, C. B., & Buswell, B. E. (1992). *Connecting students: A guide to thoughtful friendship facilitation for educators and families*. Colorado Springs, CO: PEAK Parents Center, Inc.\*

For ordering information: 6055 Lehman Drive, Colorado Springs, CO 80918; 719-531-9400. This short guide has practical tips that teachers can immediately use in facilitating friendships. The authors are both parents of students with disabilities

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- Turnbull, A. P., & Ruef, M. B. (1997). Family perspectives on inclusive lifestyle issues for individuals with problem behavior. *Exceptional Children*, 63, 211-227.

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