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## CASE REPORT / ACTIVITY REPORT

### Case Report: Changes in the Friendships of Persons with Intellectual Disabilities before and after Graduation from a Special Needs High School

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#### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to clarify changes in relationships with friends and aspirations for relationships with friends before and after graduation from a special needs high school, and to examine the background of changes in aspirations for relationships, based on semi-structured interviews with three students with intellectual disabilities and their parents.

The results showed that two common features were observed in the subjects: they viewed their relationships with friends also enrolled in special needs programs as more favorable than relationships forged outside of school, and they continued to recognize their classmates as friends after graduation. Their aspirations regarding their relationships with friends changed between before and after they had experiences interacting with friends in places other than school. This change was the development of an aspiration to interact with classmates outside of school and after graduation.

These results suggest that the experience of interacting with friends in informal settings may be a factor in the development of the aspiration to forge and maintain relationships with friends in multiple settings, both before and after graduation. We also noted that the stability of relationships with friends who also have intellectual disabilities is accompanied by proximity. In this regard, vulnerability to environmental changes in relationships with friends among youth with intellectual disabilities may occur. The development of relationships with friends in multiple settings may contribute to the stability of relationships, that is, their maintenance before and after graduating from school.

*Keywords:* Early adulthood, Friendship, Intellectual disability, Late adolescence, Special needs education school

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## 1. Introduction

Friendships are important for individuals' well-being, regardless of disability status. These relationships can satisfy the basic need for human connection and belonging<sup>11</sup>). Adolescents spend more time with friends than they did during childhood, as they begin seeking independence from parents and family. In addition to their role as peers, friends also provide a sense of belonging within a larger peer group<sup>11</sup>). In adulthood, having friends is associated with higher subjective well-being<sup>18</sup>). Friends are people we can talk to when we have a problem<sup>13</sup>), and relationships with friends also enhance leisure time<sup>6</sup>).

Relationships with friends change during life-stage transitions, especially as we move from school to employment<sup>9</sup>). It is expected that relationships with friends also change for people with intellectual disabilities who are transitioning from special needs schools to employment; however, people with intellectual disabilities have typically faced many problems since beginning school. They often have fewer friends and fewer close friendships in their social lives than youths without disabilities<sup>10,19,22</sup>). They spend less time with friends outside of school than others<sup>7,19</sup>) and have fewer friends who visit them at home<sup>5</sup>). People with intellectual disabilities may have different characteristics than their typically developing peers, with respect to aspects of relationships and the changes that accompany the transition from school to work.

Few studies have examined friendships among people with intellectual disabilities longitudinally from school graduation to employment. Spruit et al. conducted a survey on friendships among college students with intellectual disabilities and graduates and reported that many graduates continue to keep in touch with friends they made while in college<sup>20</sup>); however, their report is limited to the presence or absence of interactions and does not specifically examine how friendships were maintained. To clarify the actual state of friendships among people with intellectual disabilities and the characteristics of changes accompanying the transition, it is necessary to focus on specific events with friends experienced by youths with intellectual disabilities before and after high school graduation. By focusing on specific events without disrupting the temporal context, it is possible to clarify how they want to spend time with their friends, or how they want to be with them, based on reports of their experiences with friends.

The purpose of this study is to provide a case study of the changes in people with intellectual disabilities' relationships with friends — and people's aspirations for and changes in relationships with friends — before and after high school graduation.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were three youths with intellectual disabilities. Student A and C were difficult to express in their own words what they have experienced. For student A and student C, interviews were conducted with both the students themselves and their parents to supplement their statements. As student B was able to express by his own words what he has experienced, regarding student B, we interviewed only the person himself. Student A and student C did not attend the school during the same period of time. The three attended the same special needs school, where they participated in leisure support activities organized by the authors. This leisure support activity was available for participation during special needs high school and after graduation. Their details were as follows.

### **2.1.1. Student A**

Student A was in a special needs class throughout junior high school and then entered the high school section of the special needs school. The score WAIS-III IQ for student A was 62, when he was 20 years old. Student A had a grade of "B"(the degree of intellectual disability is relatively mild) on the Medical Rehabilitation Handbook. Student A was 20 years old at the time of our interview. Student A had been employed for three years. Prior to enrolling in high school, he had developed some life skills, such as the use of public transportation, shopping, and so on. He had not used social services for leisure support or participated in extracurricular activities. After graduation, Student A got a job in as a clerk at a supermarket with an employment program for people with disabilities.

### **2.1.2. Student B**

Student B had a diagnosis of autism, in addition to intellectual disability. He was enrolled in regular classes in elementary school. The score WAIS-III IQ for student B was 72, when he was 20 years old. Student B had a grade of "B"(the degree of intellectual disability is relatively mild) on the Medical Rehabilitation Handbook. Student B first entered a special needs school upon entering junior high. He was 17 years old at the time of our first interview. After graduation, Student B was interviewed at ages 18 and 19. In total, he was interviewed three times. By the time he entered high school, like Student A, he had developed some life skills. Student B was also a member of a softball team based at a different school than the one he attended. After graduation, Student B got a job in the manufacturing industry as part of an employment program for people with disabilities.

### **2.1.3. Student C**

Student C attended special needs classes during junior high school and then enrolled in the high school special needs department. The score Tanaka-Binet V IQ for student C was 48, when he was 16 years old. Student C had a grade of "B"(the degree of intellectual disability is relatively mild) on the Medical Rehabilitation Handbook. Student C was 17 years old at the time of our interview. The interview with Student C was conducted only while he was enrolled in the special needs high school. We dealt in detail with his aspirations for a relationship with his friends after graduation when he was nearing graduation. He had not yet developed life skills as student A and student B had prior to entering high school. Student C had used social services for leisure support with a shuttle service.

## **2.2. Procedure**

The first author was in charge of education at the school where the three students were enrolled. The first author recorded episodes from observations of students' school lives, and semi-structured interviews were based on these episodes. Our semi-structured interviews were conducted in a university laboratory or at a special needs school. Questions focused on each individual's experiences of relationships with friends from before high school through after graduation, what these experiences meant to participants, and how they wanted to spend time with their friends. For Student A and his mother, the interview was conducted while referring to past episodes and the participant's words based on the first author's records. Student A and his mother spoke by reflecting on the past. For Student B, one interview was conducted during his second year of high school, and two more were conducted after he had graduated. For Student C and his father, the interview, including their aspirations of relationships with friends after graduation, was conducted during his third year of high school.

Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim and averaged 60 minutes in length.

To ensure informed consent from the participants, an information letter was sent to parents and prospective participants; appropriately customized information about this study was provided. The decision to participate was left to the participants themselves and their parents. Ultimately, written consent to participate in the study was obtained from all participants and their parents.

### **2.3. Analysis**

Analysis of the records was focused on social interaction with friends and perception of friends. The individuals' stories about and reflections on relationship with friends were elicited in chronological order. Analysis was conducted from the time they were in special needs high school to approximately three years after graduation through interviews with three students. Specifically, we categorized the episodes and the stories into three groups: "before entering a special needs high school," "while attending a special needs high school," and "after graduating from school". The episodes were further categorized into those related to in-school and out-of-school episodes. The prompts for the interviews were tailored to the individuals' stories about and reflections on relationship with friends. The transitions in relationships with friends before and after high school graduation were examined, and triggers that changed the aspiration for a relationship with a friend were extracted from the series of transitions. The authors checked with each other for the appropriateness for each step of the analysis of interviews.

## **3. Results**

### **3.1. Student A**

#### **3.1.1. Relationships with friends during high school**

Prior to entering high school, Student A had few opportunities to interact with friends.

During his first year of high school, Student A was reluctant to engage with his classmates. When his classmates spoke to him, he responded, but he preferred to be on his own. For instance, during recesses, he often read books alone. In his second year, he began to want to engage with other students. Student A played baseball or soccer or read with his classmates during recesses. Over winter vacation, Student A complained to his mother that he would be alone after graduation. When the first author asked him why he said this, Student A replied, "I would feel loneliness alone after graduation. But I have memories of my friends, so I'm okay." During his third year of high school, Student A wanted to spend time with his classmates after school, so he asked his mother about the transportation service his classmates used. Student A was able to spend time with his classmates after school, and he has maintained these contacts since graduating.

Student A also continued to participate in leisure support activities organized by the author, in which he had been a participant since he was still in school. Student A, as a senior, offered watermelons for the younger students in summer camp. After graduation, Student A did not develop any friendships outside of his school friends. Student A never interacted with work colleagues outside of work.

Student A and his mother reflected on his experiences and said the following. During his first year of high school, Student A was nervous because had just enrolled there. He had not spent much time with friends during junior high school. His mother said that Student A could not relate to his classmates as equals. In his second year of high school, new students entered the school, and he had the courage to spend time with them. His mother said that Student A began talking more at

home about his friends. Student A explained his feelings and fears of future loneliness to his mother, expressing that he was sad to leave his friends after graduation. His mother also remembered Student A telling her that he was lonely. In his third year of high school, Student A thought he would be happier if he spent time with friends not only at school, but also after school. Student A also told his mother that he did not want individual support from an aide, but would prefer to spend time with his classmates. Since graduating, seeing friends has been a good way for Student A to reduce his stress and get through anxious times. Student A was satisfied with the interaction with school friends in the transportation service and leisure support activities. There was no aspiration to meet with friends in other places.

### **3.1.2. How aspirations for relationships with friends changed**

Student A participated in leisure support activities each year during school holidays. During his first year of high school, Student A told his mother about some activities he and his friends enjoyed, science experiments and drawing pictures. During his second year, Student A talked about classmates and older students with whom he participated in activities. Student A enthusiastically drew a picture of himself talking to another student who created a picture diary with him as part of their summer vacation homework. After that summer, Student A began spending time with his classmates during recess periods. Student A has continued participating in activities since graduating and has maintained contact with classmates from the special needs school. During his third year of high school, Student A insisted to his mother that he wanted to see his classmates after school. He began meeting them after school, with the support of an aide, and during leisure support activities.

## **3.2. Student B**

### **3.2.1. Relationships with friends during high school**

Student B could not talk with friends during junior high because of the differences in students' abilities. Once he began high school, Student B was able to make friends by talking with others for the first time.

During the fall break of his first year of high school, Student B enjoyed the companionship of his friends outside of school, following a teacher's advice. After that, Student B always met with friends after school and during holiday breaks. Since graduating, Student B has enjoyed the ongoing companionship of his friends from the special needs school.

Student B made plans with school friends to go to a hot spring or shopping on a holiday. Student B also continued to participate in leisure support activities organized by the author, in which he had been a participant since he was still in school.

As a member of another special needs school's softball team, Student B practiced diligently. In his second year of high school, the coach recommended Student B as a player for the national championship. Student B got along well with the coach and the older members of the team who coached him. All members of the team had mild intellectual disabilities, so Student B could enjoy talking with them. After graduation, Student B was on bad terms with a certain team member and his parents. This prompted Student B to say that he wanted be on the team with friends from his own school. Ultimately, Student B quit the softball team. After graduation, Student B quit the softball team, so his only friendships were with school friends. He rarely interacted with co-workers outside of the workplace.

Student B reflected on his experiences and said, "I can feel safer with friends from my school than from the softball club. I could have conversations with friends of the softball club, but I didn't like them so much. ... I'm still comfortable with

my classmates after graduation. It is difficult to make new friends outside of school friends.” When he had a problem in leisure time, he complained that he wanted to play sports with friends from school.

### **3.2.2. How aspirations for relationships with friends changed**

During his first year at the special needs high school, Student B went to lunch with members of his softball team after practice one day. He had never done something like that before. Before and after this event, Student B knew he wanted to do this with his other friends from school. Student B said, “Softball club members are more like the general public. I want to communicate with friends from school like I do with them. ... I felt like the school had limitations about seeing friends after school. I had never had ‘normal’ experiences, like having lunch with friends out of school. ... I don’t have any friends who invite me to join for lunch or just for companionship.” He added, “I’m not in the habit of spending time with friends outside of school.” After his second year of high school, Student B took day trips after school or hung out with his classmates on their days off. “Strong encouragement from the teacher allowed me to meet with my friends during the holidays. Without this, we couldn’t have organized it.”

## **3.3. Student C**

### **3.3.1. Relationships with friends during high school**

Prior to entering high school, Student C had few opportunities to interact with friends. His father said he had no friends to talk to in his special needs classes. Student C reported coming back to the special needs class feeling sad after studying in a regular class. During his first year of high school, Student C was nervous and reluctant to engage in activities. However, after his second year of high school, Student C did not want to graduate because he did not want to be separated from his friends. Student C said, "I felt like we wouldn’t see each other much after graduation, and we wouldn’t be able to see each other for a long time.” His father added, “Student C has a strong sense of reassurance and being where he is when he is at the special needs school.” After the summer break in his third year, Student C began to view his high school friendships as something that would continue after graduation. Student C said, "Friends are friends, even if you don't see them [all the time].”

### **3.3.2. How aspirations for relationships with friends changed**

Student C had the experience of interacting with classmates and alumni at leisure support activities. Student C had no such experiences prior to entering high school. Before and after his experiences in leisure support activities, Student C said that he wanted to stay in touch with his friends after graduation, “If I go to camps and such events (the leisure support activities), Student D (a classmate) has been coming recently, so I can meet him.” His father added, “He seems particularly interested these days in alumni dinners after the leisure support activities in which he will be able to participate after graduation. He says a lot out loud these days. Something like, ‘I’m going to participate there next year, too.’ Until now, it was the first time for him to go somewhere with a group of friends. He woke up to [the pleasure of companionship].”

## **4. Discussion**

This study investigated changes in participants’ relationships with friends before and after graduation from a special needs high school. In addition, their changing aspirations for relationships with friends were investigated. The results of

this study showed that the subjects had two things in common. First, they viewed special needs school friendships as more favorable than relationships made outside of school and they continued to recognize their classmates as friends after graduation. In student A and B, it was difficult to make friends outside of school friends after employment. Second, there was a change in their friendship aspirations between before and after the experience of interacting with friends in a setting other than school. This change was in their desire to interact with school friends outside of school and after graduation. Students A and B began to socialize with friends outside of school, and this has been maintained after graduation.

It has been shown that relationships with friends tend to be formed in the context of school among students with intellectual disabilities<sup>16, 21)</sup>. The present results are consistent with these reports. After graduation, it has been shown that social relationships are less common among people with intellectual disabilities. Social relationships are limited to family members or support staff<sup>8)</sup>. Even for Student A and Student B, it was difficult for them to establish friendships outside of school friends after graduation. Under these circumstances, the fact that they were able to maintain relationships with their school friends was considered important for their post-employment life. In fact, Student A mentioned that socializing with her school friends helped reduce stress at work. Behind the maintenance of relationships with friends before and after school graduation, the aspiration to maintain relationships with friends arose during the school years. Out-of-school leisure support activities for Students A and C, and the meal after softball practice for Student B, were seen as experiences of socializing with friends in informal settings different from those possible within the school environment. These experiences may have played a role in the development of the aspiration to cultivate relationships with friends in multiple settings and to maintain these relationships after graduation. Although the number of close friends on the softball team was limited for Student B, the experience of social interaction, including informal situations on the softball team, was something that he could not have obtained from his school life. The absence of opportunities to interact with friends in informal settings was also thought to be related to the absence of experiences of interacting with friends prior to entering high school, the content of these experiences, and the absence of club activities. The leisure support activities experiences of Students A and C were also additional forms of support that were not school-set activities. However, Students A and B developed interactions outside of school, whereas Student C did not. The differences between the two groups were thought to be related to the degree of restrictions on adaptive functioning, such as the availability of public transportation. These results are shown in Figure 1.

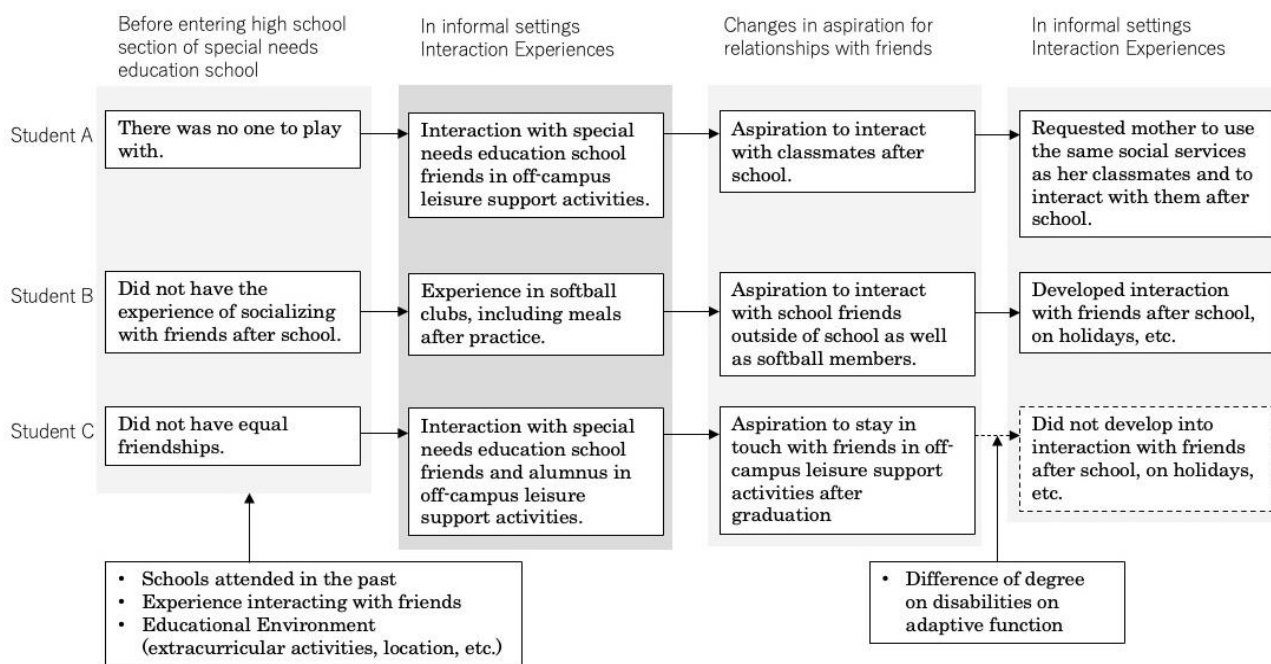


Figure 1. The process of changes in aspirations for relationships with friends

The development of an aspiration for relationships with friends was considered significant for building and maintaining these relationships. This is because friendships are voluntary, based on equality and reciprocity in essence. For empirical and theoretical purposes, friendship is best understood to be “a close, mutual, and voluntary dyadic relationship”<sup>17)</sup>. Characterized by high levels of reciprocity and perceived equality, friends share a mutual liking of one another and engage in positive interactions in which there exist expectations from both members of the dyad of companionship, security, instrumental help, and emotional support<sup>2)</sup>. Without these aspirations for relationships with friends, support for building the relationships among youths with intellectual disabilities would not be considered. At the very least, it may be necessary to consider support for nurturing these aspirations in special needs high school education. For example, it is not enough to simply provide teacher-led out-of-school trips and have students learn adaptive skills such as how to use public transportation. It may be necessary to set up situations in which students with intellectual disabilities can make self-decisions about who they want to go with and where they want to go.

Next, we discuss the effects of the development of relationships with friends in multiple settings on the maintenance of these relationships themselves. The importance of developing relationships with friends in multiple contexts has been shown regarding the stability of friendships between typically developing youths<sup>15)</sup>. One characteristic of friendships among people with intellectual disabilities is stability based on spending a lot of time together<sup>20)</sup>. During the school year, classmates are often cited as friends of students with intellectual disabilities<sup>4)</sup>; however, the stability of these friendships often involves proximity<sup>10,12)</sup>. Because of the stability associated with proximity, friendships may break down when meeting at school is no longer possible. It has been suggested that, as high school, related programs, and family support ends or becomes less stable, it may be more difficult for people with intellectual disabilities to maintain contact with existing friends and to find others with whom to build friendships<sup>12)</sup>. The relationship between stability and the development of friendships in multiple contexts has not been thoroughly examined. Different findings have been announced regarding



the development of friendships in multiple contexts in people with intellectual disabilities, including mild intellectual disabilities. Cullus reported that friendships in people with intellectual disabilities tend to be established only in settings arranged by supporters or professionals<sup>3)</sup>. However, Nasr et al. reported that, in persons with intellectual disabilities who have a strong interest in friendships, they can be proactive on their own and extend friendships across contexts and situations different from the initial setting of their meeting<sup>14)</sup>. The results of this study indicate that even individuals with mild intellectual disabilities who had not developed relationships with friends in multiple contexts can spontaneously develop friendships outside of school by developing an aspiration for friendship. Even without the adaptive skills to develop friendships in multiple contexts, as seen with Student A, he was able to meet with friends out of school and after graduation by asking his parents for support. The aspiration to engage with friends in multiple contexts, and to continue to engage with friends after graduation, is important. In addition, the development of friendships in multiple contexts could be linked to the maintenance of friendships after high school graduation.

There are three issues to be addressed in the future. The first is to investigate further the actual status of interactions with friends in informal settings among students with intellectual disabilities enrolled special needs high schools. It is necessary to investigate the degree of disability and educational environment of the youth with intellectual disabilities. Regarding the degree of disability, it is necessary to ascertain the degree of restriction of adaptive skills related to the use of public transportation, schooling history, and experiences of interaction with friends prior to entering high school. With regard to the environment, it is necessary to consider the area where the special needs school is located; the existence of extracurricular activities, such as club activities; and whether or not the student lives in a dormitory.

Another issue that needs to be examined is the relationship between the presence or absence of interactions with friends in informal settings and the presence or absence of aspirations for relationships with friends. The limited number of cases in this study indicates that the experiences of interacting with friends in informal settings may be involved in the development of aspirations for relationships with friends. It is necessary to verify whether this involvement is common among people with intellectual disabilities enrolled in special needs schools.

A third area for future research is the relationship between the development of friendships outside of school and the maintenance of these friendships after graduation. If these three issues can be clarified, it will be possible to consider a detailed curriculum for maintaining friendships after graduation in special needs high schools.

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