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**STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES TALK ABOUT  
THEIR FRIENDSHIPS**

**A Narrative Inquiry**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Education  
at Massey University, Palmerston North**

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## Abstract

This narrative inquiry explores the social experiences of four students with disabilities who were educated in four co-educational secondary schools in New Zealand. Over a period of two academic years, four students told their stories of their transition to high school and their experiences of friendships and social relationships in their classrooms, playground, and after school venues. Their parents, siblings, peers, principals, teachers, and teacher aides were also interviewed and together with school observations and relevant documents provide a holistic perspective to the students' stories.

The students' stories are foregrounded and re-presented in poetic form. Analysis of each student's accounts are developed within a socio-cultural context that examines contextual factors that shape, support, or create barriers to their friendships and social relationships. These analyses are written as narrative responses within an ethic of caring. The research discusses the nature of social relationships between students with disabilities, and between students with and without disabilities, including bullying and rejection; contextual factors such as gender that shape students' perceptions of each other; and aspects of curriculum and pedagogy that support or hinder social relationships. The agency of individual students in the processes of social relationships are analysed, and implications for further research outlined.

The study concludes that there are personal and socio-ecological factors that impact on the social experiences of students with disabilities. The findings suggest the need for teachers to examine values, attitudes, knowledge, and pedagogy in the context of their schools and adopt a multi-level approach to address the academic and social needs of all students.

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