

Sympathy exchange and the making of soulmate friendships

A micro-sociological study of adolescents with hearing loss in mainstream and boarding schools

Abstract

This article examines how friendship among adolescents with hearing loss is shaped by everyday interactional processes and socio-spatial environments. Drawing on interviews with 15 adolescents in Denmark, we compare their experiences in mainstream schools with those in a specialised boarding school. We develop a micro-sociological framework that integrates Clark's concept of sympathy exchange with Layder's notion of locales to explain how friendship outcomes emerge. Our analysis shows that in mainstream schools, limited and noisy locales constrained opportunities for reciprocal understanding, leading many adolescents to rely on passing strategies and resulting in fragile or estranged peer relations. In contrast, the boarding school offered a plurality of "slow" and "fast" locales, enabling flexible and voluntary participation, recognition of impairment, and the formation of intimate soulmate friendships alongside wider peer belonging. The study makes three theoretical contributions. Firstly, it extends the social model of disability by demonstrating how hearing loss becomes disabling through micro-level interaction barriers to sympathy exchange. Secondly and more significantly, it advances the sociology of friendship by conceptualising soulmate ties as accomplishments of interactional sympathy exchange rather than spontaneous affinities. Thirdly, it integrates theories of interaction and space to show how locales enable or disable sympathy exchange of mutual attention, recognition, and intimacy, all facilitating bonds of friendship. These findings have practical implications for school design and policy: creating diverse and accessible locales can support not only students with disabilities but also the wider peer community in developing meaningful friendships.

Keywords: Friendship; Soulmate friendship; Sympathy exchange; Locales; Disability; Hearing loss; Micro-sociology; Adolescence; School environments

FOR ADOLESCENTS WITH hearing loss, the difference between feeling like an insider or an outsider at school often hinges not only on medical technology or teaching quality, but on whether everyday interactions allow them to build friendships where they feel truly understood. Friendship is central to adolescents' well-being and identity formation, yet young people with hearing loss frequently encounter interactional barriers to participation in peer groups, leaving them more at risk of social isolation and poorer

life quality than typically hearing peers (Haukedal et al. 2022; Jepsen, Bengtsson & Pedersen 2024; Jepsen & Pedersen 2025; Jepsen & Liebst 2021). In this article, we explore how adolescents with hearing loss form and maintain close friendships under various school conditions. Drawing on interviews with 15 adolescents in Denmark, we compare experiences in mainstream schools with those in a specialised boarding school. Our analysis develops a micro-sociological framework that combines Clark's concept of *sympathy exchange* with Layder's notion of *locales*, demonstrating how soulmate friendships emerge not as spontaneous ties but as outcomes of interaction, shaped by or constrained by socio-spatial environments.

Our focus on friendship is interactional and the exchange of sympathy should also be viewed considering a long-standing tradition in social science approaches to disability issues, which have demonstrated how a disability arises from institutionalised social barriers that exclude people with functional impairments from equal participation (Shakespeare 2006). In particular, the social model developed within Anglo-Saxon disability studies highlights the oppression caused by social barriers, such as institutionalised discrimination, that reinforce disabilities for individuals with impairments (Barnes 2020). From this perspective, 'disablism functions alongside sexism, racism, ageism, and homophobia in society' (Thomas 2007:4), and disability is regarded as a social phenomenon that should be explained by the influence of structural forces driving (anti-)social behaviours (Oliver 2019). Our contribution can be viewed as a micro-sociological elaboration of the social model, as we identify the micro-level interactional processes and barriers to forming friendships, and their significance for individuals with hearing loss, focusing on the case of adolescents within a Danish context.

Our contribution is threefold. First, we expand the social model of disability by showing how hearing loss becomes disabling through micro-level interactional barriers (ranging from sudden communicative breakdowns in groups to strategies of passing and covering) rather than inherent impairment. Second, we develop the sociology of friendship by understanding soulmate ties as the result of sympathy exchange, realised through everyday interactions rather than spontaneously emerging. Third, we combine theories of interaction and space to illustrate how locales facilitate friendships characterised by recognition, intimacy, and belonging. The rest of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 presents the conceptual framework used to analyse our interview data. Section 3 details the methods and data. Sections 4 and 5 compare the experiences in mainstream and boarding schools, exploring their theoretical and practical implications. In our concluding section we discuss our overall contributions and limitations of the paper, and some recommendations for policy and future research.

Conceptual framework: friendship, sympathy and locales

This section presents a framework that brings together three theoretical strands: (1) typologies of friendship and the analytic category of "soulmate friendship," (2) the interactional mechanism of sympathy exchange and recognition, and (3) the socio-

spatial notion of locales that enable certain kinds of interaction. Together, these strands form an analytical model that links communicative participation in particular locales to friendship outcomes.

Friendship typologies and the soulmate concept

Social research on friendship recognises a range of relational forms, from loose acquaintances and instrumental contacts to intimate confidants and deep emotional ties. Typologies developed in the sociology of friendship emphasise that friendships differ in intensity, function, and emotional content. Friendships take various forms, ranging from simple acquaintances and useful contacts to those who provide favours and offer enjoyment, extending to more complex relationships such as helpmates, comforters, confidants, and soulmates (Spencer & Pahl 2018). Our focus is on intimate, sympathetic friendships or soulmates characterised by strong emotional bonds, high levels of trust and loyalty, and mutual support (Spencer & Pahl 2018). Therefore, we argue that friendship is important sociologically because of its social qualities as a confidential space for intimate and sympathetic understanding, which might help buffer against the hardships and challenges of participating in a closed institutional setting with a disability.

Friendship formation is uncertain and not automatically a result of identification, such as a mirroring similarity-relation. In fact, friends often share similar interests, activities, and values (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook 2001; King et al. 2023; Vela-McConnell 2017). Social science describes this pattern as based on the principle of homophily, meaning bonding through identification based on shared social characteristics (Hartrup 1997:5-8). While this principle summarises various research findings, it lacks explanatory power because not everyone who shares important traits becomes friends. Instead, we need to understand the interactional processes that facilitate friendship. We adopt and adapt this approach by positioning soulmate friendship as an analytically distinct form at the high-intensity end of the friendship spectrum. For this study, a *soulmate friendship* is defined as an intimate, confidential relationship characterised by:

- High levels of mutual trust and loyalty.
- Reciprocal emotional support and disclosure.
- A felt sense of being “on the same wavelength” — that is, deep mutual understanding and recognition.

This definition retains the colloquial resonance of the term while providing a sociological perspective: soulmate friendships are not just intense emotional bonds, but social achievements created through interactional effort. Later sections demonstrate how this form differs from looser peer relationships that offer membership but not necessarily intimacy or the ability for confiding and reciprocal emotional exchange.

Sympathy exchange

To explain how intimate ties are formed, Clark's concept of sympathy exchange is helpful. Sympathy exchange views interpersonal support as a sequence of emotional gifts – attention, patience, reparative actions, and other practices that demonstrate mutual care and recognition. Successful exchanges foster reciprocity and establish status as a valued interactional partner; failed or missed exchanges can lead to feelings of shame, stigma, or withdrawal. Our focus on soulmate friends thus involves determining how interconnectedness or social bonding unfolds, i.e. the decisive mechanism driving communicative exchanges that are established. Unlike other types of friendships, we suggest that soulmate friendships develop through communicative ease, shaped by exchanges of sympathy. These exchanges follow communicative rules regarding when and how to express sympathy, avoid burdening a friendship, or appear as if one needs pity. Sympathy exchange builds up a relationship, where reciprocity of emotional gifts makes one a worthy person, reckoned with by others (Clark 1997:128-157).

Following Clark (1997), we propose that sympathy is a balancing act of giving and receiving, following certain social etiquette for proper behaviour and that hearing loss can make it difficult to express a need for sympathy to remain socially open (dependability) and to reciprocate, i.e. give back to those who have shown sympathy. In more specific terms, exchanging sympathy involves giving the other 'emotional gifts' (e.g. sympathy) in terms of a reciprocal exchange of understanding each other. Hence, understanding is more than perceiving what is said and done. To display understanding means that one exchanges recognition, whereby one also gains importance and status as a person being there for others. As used here, understanding is a sympathetic act whereby parties recognise and come to stand by each other.

A key micro-social insight into human communication emphasises the process of behavioural co-adjustment, where co-present participants develop mutual visual attention and exchange verbal behaviour and understanding by self-monitoring and adapting to each other's emotional and verbal expressions (Goffman 1970; Collins 2004; Scheff 1998). Goffman has determined the spontaneous acts of self-expressive bonding as "ease" (Goffman 1983:3) in distinction to "uneasiness", when you suddenly fail to follow along, misunderstand, or get misplaced as a falling out of an expected role in an informal communicative circle (Goffman 1970:45-46). Goffman specifically outlined how failure to comply with norms of proper interaction might trigger stigma – a negative identity trait projected onto a participant – which could be accompanied by various strategies of 'covering' up one's inability to be like others (Goffman 1963:104). Hence, the deployment of tact – proper conduct fitting situational expectations – to avoid the breakdown of interactional situations is a key trait of interaction (Goffman 1990:24). Tact involves a variety of tactics and strategies to maintain appearances, including 'covering' and 'passing' as the art of active concealing a problem (covering) or to manage impression to signal the right conduct (passing) for situational acknowledgement (Goffman 1963:74-79; Goffman 1990).

Goffman's distinction between interactional ease and unease – and the related consequences for one's social position – helps clarify how sympathy exchange occurs

in everyday encounters. Ease refers to smooth co-adjustment, mutual attention, and effective repair; unease entails breakdowns, missed cues, and feelings of being out of sync, which may lead to covering or passing strategies. Together, these perspectives identify the mechanism for soulmate friendships in repeated, reciprocal episodes of sympathy exchange that generate recognition. Therefore, friendship relies on how micro-level interactions foster feelings of ease, and how attributes such as confidentiality, understanding, and solidarity develop.

As we shall explore and seek to demonstrate, hearing loss can interfere with both the perception and timing of emotional gifts; it can make it harder to receive and reciprocate sympathy because interlocutors miss verbal or paraverbal cues. However, this also depends on how interactional partners and locales compensate for these barriers – by repairing, repeating, and pacing interaction – and sympathy exchange can succeed and intimacy grow.

Locales

Social life does not happen in an abstract space, as physical arrangements facilitate certain interactions while making others difficult or impossible (Layder 1993, 2006). As suggested by Layder's notion of locales, the immediate arenas of activity – classrooms, corridors, sofa corners, art rooms, sports halls – shape what kinds of encounters are possible, how many people gather, and the tempo and sensory qualities of interaction. Locales like an office or a home aren't merely passive backdrops but have properties that enable or limit what kinds of interactions can occur, who can interact with whom, and how interactions develop. Considering our framework, locales matter for sympathy exchange because they provide opportunities for how emotional gifts can be given, received, and reciprocated. A quiet, small-scale locale reduces background noise, slows the tempo of interaction, and supports dyadic attention; such locales favour repair, repetition, and the mutual attention necessary for sympathy exchange. Conversely, noisy, rapid, or multi-voiced locales increase the likelihood of missed cues, interruptions, and the kinds of unease that undermine reciprocal exchange. In short, locales operate as material preconditions that either enable or constrain the micro-mechanisms of sympathy, exchange, recognition, and intimacy.

We thus emphasise a particularly important theoretical point about soulmate friendship, namely, that communicative exchanges of sympathetic understanding are grounded in the socio-physicality of locales (Layder 2018). Both elementary and boarding schools exemplify the same kind of formal social setting, which, in this case, is an educational institution governed by formal regulations, standardised cultural scripts, and expectations of proper behaviour among students. However, it remains an open question whether informal relationships are enabled or disabled by the locales of the environment.

As a way of synthesising the strands of framework, we suggest the following analytical figure linking locales – communicative exchange – friendship outcomes:

Linking locales, communicative exchange and friendship outcomes

The figure below summarises analytical sequences used throughout the analysis.

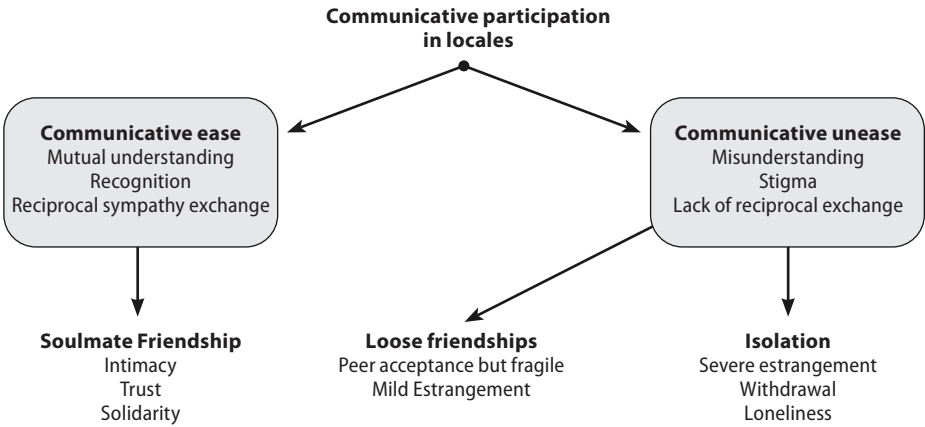


Figure 1: Communicative participation and friendship types

Analysis begins with adolescents’ participation in interaction — moments when they attempt to join conversations, activities, or dyadic encounters in a locale that affords varying degrees of communication. The central mechanism is whether communication unfolds with *ease* or *unease*. *Ease* designates interactional episodes in which parties successfully exchange sympathy, attend to each other, repair misunderstandings, and reciprocate with emotional gifts. *Unease* designates episodes marked by missed cues, interruptions, and breakdowns in reciprocity.

When sympathy exchange proceeds with ease, interactions can accumulate mutual trust and recognition, producing soulmate friendships over time. When interactions are uneasy but not entirely broken, participants may remain in the social field as *loose friends*: they enjoy some degree of peer acceptance but experience mild estrangement and fragile belonging. When unease persists and remains unaddressed, it can lead to isolation and severe estrangement.

In the following, we outline the methodological ground for the subsequent analysis and deployment of our analytical model.

Methods, data and analysis

We address our research question – how access to different locales increases opportunities for engaging in exchanges of sympathy that facilitate sympathetic and intimate friendships – through a comparative case study examining how 15 young people with hearing loss participated in various school environments in Denmark.

Case study design

Our case study was based on fieldwork and interviews conducted at an independent lower secondary boarding school (hereinafter referred to as the boarding school), which specialises in social inclusion and cultural education for adolescents with hearing loss aged 14-16 years. In Denmark, the boarding school tradition dates to the 18th century, when such schools were originally established as common schools for the cultural education of the illiterate. Today, there are 250 boarding schools with diverse profiles, including those focused on art, sports, and music; only 15 remain as traditional schools. Common schools focus on the original foundations of the boarding school movement: providing cultural education and instruction in democratic participation ideals, alongside preparing pupils for their final examinations. Our research was conducted at a special school that addresses challenges related to hearing loss and social life. The school accommodated 15 adolescents with hearing loss among its 99 pupils.

Comparative logic

Analytically, our comparison of different school types explores similarities across cases (Ragin 1987:9-14) by contrasting the boarding school experience of communicative peer group relations and friendship with prior elementary school experiences. The boarding school represents a contrasting case to elementary schools because it focuses explicitly on social inclusion and pedagogical support for youth with hearing loss. It differs fundamentally from the individual inclusion model characterising general elementary schools – where hearing-loss students participate in mainstream settings – which do not co-enrol hearing-loss pupils as a group and typically do not focus specifically on disabilities.

By studying relationship-making, both peer and intimate relations, across two different school settings, we specifically examine the role that locales, as socio-physical spaces, play in forming relationships. Our study is thus theoretically informed to enhance our understanding of the conditions that enable the formation of soulmate relationships. We expected that the boarding school might offer more beneficial circumstances for intimate and sympathetic friendship compared to elementary schools. Our comparison, therefore, contrasts mainstream school environments (before boarding school) with the boarding school setting (after enrolment). Hence, our analysis focuses on identifying the barriers and opportunities for young people with hearing loss to participate actively in the exchange of sympathy, which is central to building and maintaining friendships.

Participants and interview design

We interviewed 15 adolescents at the boarding school, comprising 11 girls and 4 boys, aged 14-15 years. Two rounds of interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately one hour. The first interview took place four months into their boarding school stay, focusing on their earlier experiences in secondary school, particularly the last year before boarding school, and their initial impressions of the boarding school. The second interview took place 11 months into their stay and focused on their overall boarding

school experience. Overall, the interviews aimed to gather participants' experiences and evaluations of peer groups and friendships within different school settings.

The interview technique drew on insights from the "micro-analytical interview" (Stern 1995) to explore how emotions and behaviours relate to specific experiences, emphasising detailed accounts of behaviours in concrete situations. The adolescents were asked about specific participation scenarios. Our semi-structured interviews focused on classroom activities, informal peer relations, perceptions of friendship, and feelings of pride in overcoming difficulties. A particular set of questions addressed the significance of physical environments at the schools and whether participants felt more comfortable or uncomfortable in certain areas of the environments.

Since hearing loss and friendship concern personal issues, ethical concerns were taken into consideration in the interview situation to focus on the social issues of hearing loss and friendship, rather than probing into the psychological and emotional aspects of their difficulties with hearing loss. When they raised challenges, they were acknowledged and not further questioned. To secure a comfortable and secluded location for the interview, a light office room that facilitated lip-reading at the school, as well as a room students were familiar with, was used. All interviews were conducted in a confidential setting, face-to-face, making it easier to hear and lip-read. All interviewees demonstrated high adaptability in face-to-face communication, and the interview proceeded without interactional breakdowns. In two cases, the interviewees became emotionally moved during their narration, and the interviewer asked if they would like to continue or if the interview should be postponed. In both cases, the interviewees reassured us that it was nice and important to share their story, and in both cases, the interview continued after a brief break.

All interviewees were informed about the focus of the interview, which was on the experience and social implications of having a hearing loss for school participation and peer relationships.

In Denmark, there are no institutional boards for the approval of social science studies in general; however, the study was conducted in accordance with the University of Copenhagen's ethical guidelines and complied with national data protection laws. Informed consent to participate in the interview was retrieved in writing from parents or caretakers and verbally from the students. All interviewees were promised full anonymity. Hence, we use fictitious names and cannot disclose further identifying details about the interviewees since fellow students, teachers, and principals might be able to identify them otherwise.

Analytical approach

Methodologically, we compare the two school cases from a theoretically informed stance, which contrasts with methodologies focused on how social scientific research should progress through abduction, where multiple theories are applied and tested against empirical data to generate new hypotheses about what a case represents (Tavory & Timmermans 2014:5,19,49). Although we acknowledge that identifying new

analytical units through ongoing engagement with multiple theories can be a useful pragmatic heuristic for developing new knowledge, we propose that the fundamental case study question – how to frame the case – depends on robust and coherent theory to identify comparative units and generate systematic empirical investigation that furthers explanatory knowledge.

Hence, our qualitative case study is theoretically framed with a focus on the social unit of friendship, defined as the exchange of sympathy. The following analysis adopts a micro-sociological reading of narratives, examining how adolescents experience peer group relations, value friendship, and face emotional burdens as they strive to participate in communicative peer relations and develop friendships. This approach specifically concentrates on interactional barriers and the exchange of sympathy. As outlined in Figure 1, we identify three types of behavioural outcomes from communicative exchanges: sympathetic, mild estrangement, or severe estrangement, depending on whether participants can exchange sympathy and understanding in peer communication.

Comparative analysis

Part I. Mainstream schools – passing, covering, and estrangement

Strategies of passing and covering

The 15 adolescents with hearing loss we interviewed attended 15 different mainstream schools before arriving at the boarding school and were the only ones in their class with a hearing loss. A common experience among all interviewees was the pressure to conform and mimic their peers' more agile communicative behaviour. All interviewees expressed a need to appear like their peers, aiming to *pass* as ordinary members of peer groups in the Goffmanian sense of the term (Goffman 1963:74-79). That is, they were aware of their behaviour in order not to call attention to their hearing loss during communication difficulties. A clear example of this passing strategy is provided by Johanne, who had many friends:

I want to say that I often thought that I did not have a hearing loss because I did not want to accept it for a long time [...] I was not supposed to be weird or different in any way. I really should not [...] I have always been very social and have often led the conversation [...] I did not have difficulty saying, 'No, can't you just say that again?' but I had much difficulty saying that I had hearing impairment [...] However, I also did not want them to consider my hearing loss.

Johanne's experience of being very aware of not drawing attention to her hearing difficulties, thus seeking to pass as hearing, was a common pattern among the interviewees. Johanne underlines that she did not have problems calling out and asking peers for repetition but felt uneasy whenever peer attention fell on her hearing loss.

For most interviewees, however, a common experiential pattern was a heightened awareness of when and how to interrupt and ask others for clarification. This behaviour can be understood as a way of seeking to avoid being exposed and to conceal the implications of hearing loss. The contrast between sympathy and undue attention to hearing loss as something extraordinary is clearly illustrated by Josefine's account:

The teachers were also good at asking me if it mattered where I should sit in class and if I should have a chair that could be moved around, rather than one that was fixed like the others [...] I wouldn't say I liked that, because I was like that, I did not want to stand out like that [...] Oh, and it was also very much like the others; I used humour to get through it, so the others also just made fun of it, like, 'But Josefine, she is deaf,' and stuff like that. I think that was cool enough because I did not like the seriousness of it, and I did not like that, (said in a small voice). 'Yes, Josefine is deaf, and it is a pity for her.' I do not want that. No.

Josefine contrasts sympathies with the dangers of pettiness. Although humour can be a cover-up for confronting serious difficulties of hearing loss, Josefine experienced it as a way of opening a stage for relating with friends around fun. Josefine had good peer relations: 'I had good friends; they were so sweet'. However, during the interview, she talked about resistance to her hearing impairment, a feeling of not wanting to face it and its social constraints. She would not share this with her friends in school and hence lacked the secure buffer zone of intimate soulmate relationships.

Mild estrangement: peer group membership with uneasy participation

Five interviewees accounted for standing outside peer relations, whereas ten interviewees felt accepted in peer groups. However, even those who belonged to peer groups faced ongoing challenges. As Erik said:

It happened every time we were 4. I missed some words, and then there was something I did not hear, and I was sort of outside in the way [...] yes, I asked if they would repeat, but it was not always so cool; most of the time, I asked... also because I knew them. However, it is difficult to accept; I would rather be without hearing impairment, but I must live with it.

Erik's experience represents a commonality as to how the ten adolescents who belonged to a peer group faced ongoing challenges with communicative participation whenever the group size increased. Such difficulties are understandable as a breakdown of the finetuned verbal and non-verbal skills necessary to co-adjust in situational encounters (Collins 2004; Goffman 1970:45). We suggest this tension in peer-group communication captures a basic pattern found across the interviews: avoid calling attention to one's

disability and limitation and seeking to convey the understanding that you are alike. These situations of passing demonstrate “mild estrangement” of being accepted insider to peer group circles but estranged as the one who stands out involuntarily when the communicative pace erupts.

In line with our theoretical proposition derived from Clark (1997), estrangement involves a risk of being caught up in a position of relinquishing claims to others’ compassionate understanding – their sympathy – thus violating the feeling rule of engaging in sympathy exchange to be reckoned with as a partner in a close friendship.

Six of the ten interviewees with a peer group accounted for more intimate and confidential friendships that qualify as soulmate relationships. Susanne accounted for her participation in the peer group, where she would often sit passively or shift between different groups in school, she had two friends with whom she felt at ease outside school:

Susanne: I had friends in school but better friends outside of school. I have two special friends whom I met at a summer camp for adolescents with hearing impairment, and I feel a different connection – that we can talk about everything.

Interviewer: So, you feel that they understand you better?

Susanne: They know about it because they have also experienced the same thing. It is special. We are there for each other.

Susanne’s experience of having to special friends outside school is an example of being at ease in a mutual understanding (soulmates), where sympathetic friendship rests in a connection in which feelings of sympathy permeate the relationship: ‘we are there for each other’ (Susanne). In comparison, the peer groups in school contained interactional barriers to getting fully involved on similar terms as peers, that is, to experience communicative ease in relationships.

For other interviewed adolescents – Theis, Erik, Leif, Josefine – intimate relationships were recovered by moving around in small circles of solidarity outside the more difficult terrain of volatile communicative peer relations in class. Sympathetic friendships thus offered a place of belonging, even though mild estrangement within larger peer groups had to be regularly faced. The importance of understanding within small-scale intimate relationships was commonly qualified in terms of trust and confidentiality. The following quote exemplifies these attributes of friendship when asked what was important about friendship:

Erik: We understand and can trust each other, so you know that if you tell the other something, he will not tell others.

The quote qualifies our basic theoretical proposition that soulmate friendship involves a deep feeling of standing by each other, which rests on opportunities to exchange sympathetic understandings freely and to be at ease in small-scale communicative groups.

The understanding displayed through trust also necessitates an engagement, whereby one takes care of the other's situation. The mild estrangement that ensures communicative difficulties is held in check by the opportunities to turn to soulmates for understanding.

In the following section, we turn to account for a different and more severe form of estrangement in which access to and the build-up of friendship relationships are lost.

Severe estrangement: social isolation and the lack of friendship

Five adolescents with hearing loss experienced a lack of access to develop peer group relationships. They experienced rejection and withdrew to the periphery of the social peer circles, qualifying their situation as lacking friendships altogether. Maria explicates the loneliness that was a common experience among these interviewees:

I have said before that I have not had any friends. It has been really hard. They say I had depression from 6th to 8th grade, and I do not want to blame the hearing impairment, but it is probably something to do with it [...] I felt I had to apologise for asking for repetition. But it was also because I was so afraid that they would be annoyed with me.

In the interview, Maria talked about a friend she walked around with and that they were not real friends. Her perception of the value of relationships was marked by fragility, as she explained:

She spoke very softly, and I almost felt guilty because I had to say to her all the time like this: 'I really cannot help it. Don't you want to speak louder?' In the end, you kind of give up because it is not cool for her, either. However, that is the way it was.

Following our theoretical outline, Maria is caught in an isolated distance from the peer groups due to the experience of exposure and not being able to pass. She feels she is standing in the way of others' communicative ease, thus leading to a situation where the exchange of sympathy (emotional gifts) does not develop (Clark 1997). Maria's only relationship with the friend she walks around with is peculiar regarding sympathy exchange. Maria does not ask her friend to speak louder, which can be understood as an act of not pressuring her friend to change. While not placing undue demands on her friend to speak louder shows an understanding of her friend's behaviour, it can also be understood to generate a situation where no claims of sympathy are explicated and exchanged.

Clara gave a different account of the consequences of lacking both access to a peer group and the secure comfort zone of a soulmate relationship:

I did not hear what they were saying, and I could not be in the conversations; I got quite lonely, and then I was also bullied because people were like: 'We do not know. She does not say much. She is not active in class. She does not laugh at our

jokes. She is very isolated. So, people were like, I do not know how to react to this [...] There was someone I was with, but I was never really friends with them. It was more like during recess than when we were together.

Clara stood alone as Maria did. Clara could not access exchange relations of giving and receiving and felt self-estranged with her hearing loss and loneliness. Others shared such experiences, like Soeren, who gave up and explained: 'I opted out of all the social in class'. Such situations, especially illustrated in the words of Clara are likely to entail stigma as a negative projection of what one stands for vis-à-vis others (Goffman 1963).

The experience of lacking access to peer groups or intimate friendship relations leads to severe estrangement, where the hearing loss difficulties become inescapable, and the person is caught up in loneliness. Compared with those who did find soulmates, there is no secure place for receiving and giving understanding. As Solvej explained, there was a lack of understanding and forgetfulness about her difficulties:

These episodes in which you say 'what?' and still cannot hear and it is a bit like 'what, what, what?' In the end, you just like nought and smile. Pretending as if you heard it.

Pressure to appear just as agile as their peers in communicative relations involves conformity: a feeling of not making undue sympathy claims. However, suppose they succeed in holding back from revealing the communication tensions. In that case, this also contrasts with the requirement of robust soulmate relationships: to make claims to sympathy sometimes to not appear disengaged. In the following, we provide an explanation for constrained exchange relationships drawing on s Layder's (2018) notion of locales.

Limited locales constrain sympathy exchange and rare soulmates

Limited access to places with opportunities to follow along with ease was a common experience among adolescents in elementary schools. Classroom education and noisy breaks inside the hallways or outside in the yard would thus entail few locales for establishing more intimate friendships. For some, the classroom was stated as the best option when asked if there was a particular place at school that was good to be in:

Susanne: I think it was nice to be in the classroom. There were not many places to be besides that. We were often in the gym hall during breaks, and it was a very big room with many reverberations, and it was not better. And outside, it was windy; sometimes the sound in the microphones is very disturbing if it is very windy or if it rains.

Louise: It was mostly the breaks that were a problem because there were many small conversations inside the classroom, and it was difficult to follow group talk because everyone was talking over each other.

Susanne belonged to a peer group, but she further explained that she found it difficult to follow along in the breaks, thus echoing other interviewees like Louise. Both found the classroom the best option to stay in, but these locales would still be an obstacle to establishing communicative ease, and they did not characterise the peer relations in terms of soulmate attributes.

A very telling example of how locales play a decisive role in shaping communicative participation is Soeren's account of how the physical locale matters to the generation of communicative difficulties and estrangement:

Soeren: In the breaks, it was difficult to jump into and follow along in the conversations, and then I would need to ask them to repeat. It became a downer. Sometimes, I would ask if I heard a word I recognised, 'What the hell happened there?' Sometimes, nobody answered, or they gave a quick explanation while the conversation went on, and the others would return to it. When I think back, I believe it was most of the contexts when we were outside. There was this moped shed where we stood all the time. There were bad acoustics and reverberation. I was completely lost there. Sometimes, when it happens today [getting lost in conversation], I am back in that shed.

Soeren described himself as an outsider in school, which our theoretical approach suggests concerns how social life is localised and staged in ways that do not allow for engagement in communicative exchange with ease. The shed captures the essence of how social relationships, norms of conversation, and roles become physically shaped as Soeren experiences the social loss of participatory options and relationships within the noisy locale that accompanies his hearing loss. The breaks that should be a time for socialising and friendship relations become 'a downer', and the shed is a stage for how possibilities for more intimate communication are lost. Even today, the shed remains a reminder to him of losing one's communicative ground.

In sum, the mainstream school environment of peer group associations was related to the common experience of worrying about how to fit in and be like hearing peers, thus making strategies of passing common, i.e., hearing loss is a constant cause of alertness to how one differs from peers. Sympathetic relationships provide a confidential space to share and express emotional understanding with each other equally. Still, a normative pressure to conform and not expose oneself to others' undue attention to a hearing disability is a key barrier to forming a soulmate, and this barrier gains additional weight due to the limited locales to withdraw to and socialise with friends. As we shall show, this situation changes at the boarding school, where sympathetic relationships develop strongly in a social environment that provides diverse locales for soulmate making.

Part II. Boarding school – sympathy exchange in diverse locales

Figure 2 illustrates how the plurality of locales in the boarding school context enables different forms of social participation and friendship-making.

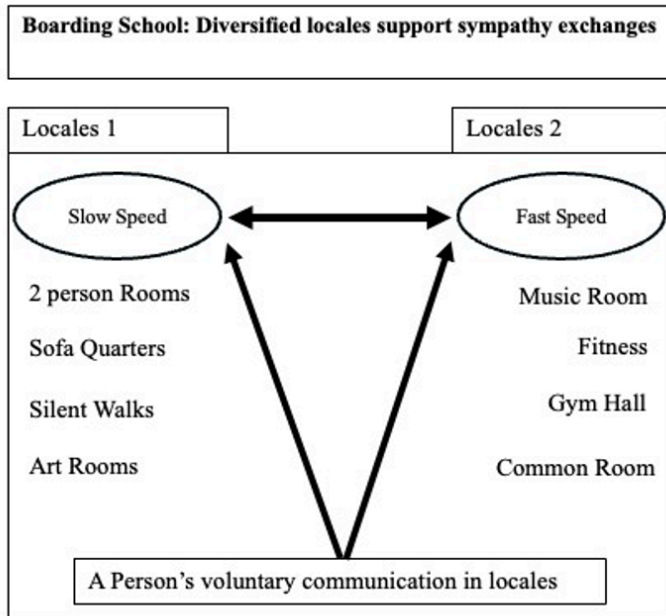


Figure 2: Locales and Opportunities for Friendship

We distinguish between slow locales and fast locales, referring to different communicative speeds. Slow locales are small-scale, quiet settings such as private rooms, sofa corners, art rooms, or silent walks. These spaces of slow interaction reduce communicative strain and provide opportunities for dyadic or triadic encounters, where trust, intimacy, and soulmate friendships are most likely to develop.

Fast locales, by contrast, are large, energetic environments such as sports halls, music rooms, common lounges, or group dining areas, in which the communicative pace is high. These spaces support playful interaction, group belonging, and wider peer recognition, even if they are less conducive to intimate exchanges. Importantly, students at the boarding school could move flexibly between slow and fast locales, choosing when to withdraw for intimacy and when to join broader peer activities.

This plurality of locales meant that adolescents were not forced into strategies of passing or withdrawal, as in mainstream schools. Instead, they could openly negotiate sympathy exchange in settings that matched their communicative needs and personal preferences. As a result, both soulmate friendships and wider peer networks flourished.

Importantly, the locales do not determine the nature of social settings and communicative exchanges supporting intimate friendships. However, the locales are important for localising how communicative exchange can unfold, and self-expression is possible.

Flourishing intimate friendships

The boarding school offers a complete turnaround for those with hearing loss, allowing them to develop intimate friendships, given the opportunities to abandon their needs to pursue behavioural strategies of passing or covering. Nanna, a girl without hearing loss, had experienced a hostile environment in primary school, where it was not normal to care for each other. She experiences the boarding school as a location of compassion:

It is very normal. In comparison, you can see that people align if you just need to relax. Persons [adolescents] who do not talk to one another normally just do it. It is pleasant.

Theis and Erik capture the experience of how friendships flourish:

Theis: Well, of course, friend groups have formed, but you do not have to be in that friend group all the time. You can be everywhere, so you are not tied to one group.

Erik: Well, what is different [from mainstream school] is that you are with people 24/7 here, and you can quickly connect with people. If I return to my room to relax, I must only take a few steps out and find someone to talk to, unlike in mainstream school.

The experience of Theis and Erik captures how the boarding school is experienced as a place with low barriers to meet and socialise. Openness towards each other also supports the experience of living next to each other. Moving from the private sphere to various locales of connection and relationship cultivation is easy, as Erik underlines. This provides an opportunity to relate with each other and make new friendships, some of which develop into soulmate relationships:

Solvej: In fact, my best friend is also hearing impaired, and it was she who got me to really use the hearing aids. For she was just like: 'Here you go, queen, take them on.' Super fantastic. It is great to have one you can relate to.

Solvej's example demonstrates how meeting with another person requires compassionate understanding and leadership, which makes a positive difference in managing the challenges of hearing loss.

Louise, who was withdrawn in her friendship group in primary school, accounts for the differentiated value of friendships as a free choice of locales:

I am not the most social person, but people are good at withdrawing from noisy locales. If there are many people in the common area, I walk to another place and meet friends. I like that you can go from one place to the other; there are many things to do, from playing games in common areas to sitting in art and drawing. The most important thing here for friendship is that people are willing to repeat things without it becoming a burden.

Louise might not stand in a particular intimate relation within her main friendship group (5-6 people) but felt how others showed sympathy for those with hearing loss by seeking out locales of little noise. Such experiences were also shared by others when asked about places they like to be:

Susanne: Sometimes I am in my own corridor, sometimes I am in the lounge with some of the others. I like to be in the dining hall because I talk with all the others, and I like my room, because it is nice and quiet.

Josefine: There is the multi-activity room, and experimentation room, and then there is the little pearl, room eight, it's just such a cosy room, I love to be in there. We also often sleep in there at the weekends because it is just so cosy.

Lousie: I use my room where I relax, and then I spend a lot of time in the lounge with my friends.

Sum up: Diverse locales foster opportunities for sympathy exchange

This second part of our analysis emphasises the importance of diverse localities and the high level of autonomy among pupils in choosing how and when to participate socially. A key finding is how access to different localities within the boarding school creates opportunities for mutual understanding and, consequently, the development of close friendships. Specifically, various localities characterised by slow and fast-paced environments offer spaces for residence and activity. Adolescents do not need to shield themselves from focusing on hearing impairment, as shared activities and understanding foster empathy exchanges, primarily through repeating and repairing communication. In this regard, differences between those with hearing difficulties and those without generally seem to be reduced through communication in which friendships can develop around specific, localised activities.

Conclusion

This study has shown how locales shape the micro-processes of friendship-making among adolescents with hearing loss. In mainstream schools, limited and noisy locales forced students to adopt strategies of passing or covering, which enabled partial peer group acceptance but also produced estrangement and, in some cases, to a severe degree. In contrast, the boarding school's plurality of "slow" and "fast" locales created flexible opportunities for interaction, allowing adolescents to engage in sympathy exchange and develop intimate soulmate friendships alongside broader group belonging.

Our findings contribute to the sociology of disability and friendship in three ways. First, they extend the social model of disability (Barnes 2020) by clarifying how disability arises from daily interactional barriers rather than inherent impairments, demonstrating that hearing loss becomes disabling in settings that limit sympathetic exchange. Second, they enhance the sociology of friendship by showing that soulmate relationships are not purely spontaneous but are forged through carefully balanced exchanges of sympathy, which depend on suitable socio-spatial conditions. Third, they connect Clark's (1997) theory of sympathy exchange with Layder's (2018) spatial concept of locales, thereby advancing a micro-sociological account of how physical and social environments support such sympathy exchanges and foster a sense of social belonging.

While our analysis highlights the importance of sympathy exchange and socio-spatial contexts, several limitations still exist. Firstly, the study is based on a relatively small sample of adolescents within a specific Danish setting, which restricts the broader applicability of the results. Larger, cross-national research could investigate whether similar mechanisms are present in other educational and cultural environments. Secondly, our focus on locales means that other crucial factors – such as pedagogical approaches, school ethos, and the role of teachers – remain underexplored, even though these may also influence opportunities for intimacy and belonging. Thirdly, our interviews reflect adolescents' self-reported experiences, but do not include the viewpoints of ordinary-hearing peers or teachers, which could offer a more comprehensive understanding of interactional dynamics.

Future research should investigate how sympathy exchange develops within mixed hearing–non-hearing peer groups, how educational practices interact with spatial arrangements, and whether the mechanisms we identify apply to other types of disability. Such studies could determine whether combining sympathy exchange with diverse settings serves as a universal approach to fostering inclusion or if it is more specific to distinct contexts.

Despite these limitations, our study's insights demonstrate how spatial design supports the organisation of school life for inclusion and well-being. While pedagogy, peer culture, and student composition also influence friendship formation, our analysis emphasises that the diversity of locations is a key mechanism allowing adolescents to balance group participation with close bonds.

In practical terms, our research suggests that schools can enhance inclusion by offering adolescents a variety of opportunities for informal interaction across different types of settings. Creating such spaces does not have to be costly; existing art rooms, sports facilities, and lounge areas can be adapted for more flexible, student-led use. By recognising that schools are not solely centres of learning but also important sites for fostering friendship, educational policy can address both the social and academic needs of young people with disabilities.

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