
Research Article

Kapwa Ko, Kaibigan Ko: Unmasking Friendship Between Children with Autism and Non-Neurodivergent Children through the Lens of Kapwa Theory

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ABSTRACT

Friendship is a cornerstone for a child's formative years. It is their earliest avenue for belongingness, where they learn connection, reciprocity, and empathy. While traditional Western literature often frames Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) through a social deficit lens, positioning cross-neurotype relationships as inherently asymmetrical—this view overlooks the relational dynamics unique to collectivist settings. This qualitative phenomenological study explored how Children with Autism (CWA) and Non-Neurodivergent (NND) children define friendship, how friendships are established and maintained between cross-neurotypes, and how these children relate to and treat their friends. Data were gathered through dyadic interviews of seven (7) pairs of friends, consisting of one CWA and one NND child. This study interpreted the data through the lens of *Kapwa Theory*, a key concept in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) revealed that for these friendship pairs, friendship is more than just a social activity. It was defined as a *source of emotional security, the embodiment of kindness, a lasting connection, and a personification of the concept of friendship*. Friendships blossomed naturally through *nurturing bonds via mutual engagement and bridging connections through social scaffolding*. Their bonds remained strong by *cultivating a sense of sustained togetherness and upholding social harmony*. In their daily interactions, the children engaged with their friends by *displaying emotional attunement, providing instrumental support, and responding with reciprocal generosity*. By living out the values of *kapwa, pakikisama*, and *pakikiramdam*, the participants directly challenge the long-standing assumptions that neurodiverse relationships are innately one-sided, full of conflict, or bound for misunderstanding.

Keywords: *Children with Autism, Non-Neurodivergent, Friendship, Inclusive Education, Kapwa Theory, Social Integration*

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Introduction

A person's relational pattern begins with their formative experiences of childhood friendship. With issues of making an inclusive world for all, what knowledge can we gain from children already living in it; and what can we impart to the world to make it a better place?

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects how a person communicates and interacts with others (American Psychological Association, 2023). Individuals with ASD may find it more challenging to participate in everyday activities due to these established differences in functioning (Akpeke et al., 2024). In recent years, the number of diagnoses has been steadily climbing up. Statistics estimated that around 6 out of every 100 children worldwide were reported to have ASD in 2021, and in 2022, this had risen to 10 out of 100 (Zeidan et al., 2022). According to Reyes and Domingo (2024), an estimated 1.2 million individuals were diagnosed with ASD in the Philippines, with the number expected to rise in the following years.

Friendship is one of the simplest forms of social integration for Persons with Autism (PWAs). Meaningful participation develops a sense of belonging, reducing potential isolation (Chan et al., 2022). Successful social integration is associated with fulfillment and self-actualization, while improved social functioning further strengthens one's sense of self (Zhang et al., 2022; Okumura et al., 2024). Despite the benefits, further study on friendships including PWAs have remained scant in the past years (Fox & Asbury, 2024; Sharman & Seedorf, 2025).

The term non-neurodivergent (NND), also known as neurotypical, is used to describe people who do not fall into the neurodivergent umbrella (Kennedy et al., 2025; Mahak et al., 2025). NNDs do not exhibit traits or indicators of atypical brain development. Conversely, neurodivergent individuals are those who have distinct cognitive processing styles that makes them experience the world differently, such as those with ASD (Legault et al., 2021).

The study preferred to use the term "NND" rather than "neurotypical" to avoid reinforcing stigma around what is viewed as "normal"

(Mitchell et al., 2021; Glenn, 2022). "Allistic" is a term that means non-autistic, however, its inherent inclusion of other neurodivergent conditions such as learning disabilities or Down syndrome, among others, deemed it lacking for the purposes of the study. Thus, the term "non-neurodivergent" was used to describe individuals who are not diagnosed with any form of neurodivergence. This distinction was established as it provides a better grasp to study the relational dynamics between them and PWAs.

In school settings, both groups benefit from having friends. On one hand, PWAs improve socialization and communication skills (Dyer, 2022), which are adaptive skills necessary to function well in the community (McMaughan et al., 2024). On the other hand, NND learners develop acceptance of neurodiversity, leading to a sophisticated understanding for individual differences (Lin et al., 2025). Despite these benefits, PWAs struggle to establish social connections due to differences in social approach, a preference for routines, and an insistence on sameness of interests (Schneid & Raz, 2020; Bailey et al., 2019). In turn, these may lead to misunderstandings, reduced opportunities for friendship, and experiences of exclusion and isolation (Gray et al., 2023; Friedman & Rizzolo, 2018).

Given the greater mental health vulnerabilities among PWAs, understanding the nature of friendships between PWAs and NND individuals becomes crucial to address the role of social relationships in their well-being. Yet, prior researchers tend to focus on deficit-based viewpoints (Johannessen, 2025) and individual accounts which overlook the relational nature of this particular pairing (Walsh et al., 2025; Sasson et al., 2017; Black et al., 2024), with parent-led methods further limiting depth and introducing potential bias (Fox & Asbury, 2024).

With these gaps identified, the present study employed paired interviews to explore meaning-making, bonding, and mutual adjustments in Children with Autism (CWA) and their NND friends through the lens of *kapwa*. It addresses concern of ecological validity and potential biases of individual children accounts; in addition, this methodological approach allows relational dynamics to be directly

observed beyond conventional frameworks (Rosqvist et al., 2016; Creswell et al., 2019).

This study yields results that support the implementation of Republic Act No. 7277 or the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, as it promotes and facilitates the integration of PWAs into society. Through this, they would have healthier mental health and well-being. In essence, the study fulfills the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and 3 (Good Health and Well-Being). Beyond these domestic and global mandates, the study provides a pivotal contribution to the international repository of inclusive practices, including the previously mentioned practices and interventions. This also serves as a strategic benchmark for developing nations striving to operationalize abstract human rights mandates by empirically documenting the mechanisms of meaningful inclusion through social acceptance. Through its emphasis on social connection and inclusion, the study contributes to the realization of a compassionate, high-trust society in which every individual, regardless of neurotype, can flourish and fully participate.

Theoretical Framework

Kapwa, introduced by Virgilio G. Enriquez in 1978, is a foundational concept in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*. It denotes a shared inner self, in which individual identity is intrinsically linked to others (Maninang, 2025). In principle, this framework asserts that identity is relational rather than solely individual. *Kapwa* recognizes others as extensions of oneself, establishing a sense of interconnectedness that persists even among strangers which posits that familiarity, or, in this case, a lack thereof, is overlooked by collective identity (Kobayashi et al., 2024). *Pakikipagkawpa* (shared self) drives Filipino relationships; it emphasizes respect and dignity in treating other people (Reyes, 2015).

In this light, *kapwa* moves beyond establishing social harmony in one's company; it embodies the moral and emotional intelligence inherent in Filipino relational culture. Erasga (2015) supposes that at the center of this is the Filipino value of *pakikiramdam*, or relational sensitivity, the attunement to others' feelings,

needs, and unspoken cues. Shaped by empathy, *pakikiramdam* puts others first, putting emphasis on being sensitive to others feelings. Through emotional awareness and a sense of shared ground, this sensitivity functions as a social and moral compass, helping individuals to achieve harmony in a given social situation (Labor & Gastardo-Conaco, 2021). A person's sense of self with their *kapwa* becomes deeply attuned, moving farther away from a superficial connection.

Furthermore, the term "surface values" was conceptualized by Enriquez to refer to a set of values that are most apparent to outsiders, the non-Filipinos (Yacat, 2013; Clemente et al., 2008). These surface values are split into two: accommodative and confrontative. Accommodative values place a high priority on societal harmony, empathy, and relational sensitivity. It includes *hiya* (propriety/dignity), which facilitates polite conduct; *utang na loob* (gratitude/reciprocity), which fortifies relationships by acknowledging favors; and *pakikisama* (companionship/esteem), which encourages cooperative involvement. These principles mediate harmony in relationships and a common identity.

Meanwhile, confrontative values arise when people encounter situations that call for resistance or assertiveness while maintaining relational awareness. Confrontative values include *pakikibaka* (resistance/struggle), which reflects the ability to face adversity while maintaining social attunement; *sama/lakas ng loob* (courage/guts), which enables assertiveness in defending oneself or others; and *bahala na* (determination/risk-taking), which encourages resilience in uncertain circumstances.

Discussed further is what is termed as the linking socio-personal value, referring to *ka-gandahang-loob*. It pertains to a person's inner goodness, relating to genuine goodwill to others. Stemming from a pure heart, it serves as the foundation for societal values, namely *karangalan* (dignity), *katarungan* (justice), and *kalayaan* (freedom); all acted upon without expecting anything in return. Together, they form *pakikipagkapwa*, the system that guides Filipino relationship building.

To summarize, Enriquez (1992) structured the aforementioned principles into four

distinct dimensions: a core value, surface values, pivotal values, and societal values. At the heart of this theory is *kapwa*, the Filipino core value. In effect, the subsequent values are anchored in this central value. Accordingly, Filipino identity is best understood as inextricably relational, guided by a deep sense of moral and emotional responsibility for his or her *kapwa*. To exemplify, confrontational expressions are not disruptions; rather, they aid in how people negotiate and navigate social frictions. Meanwhile, surface actions are reflective of what a particular community places importance on. Filipino socialization is shaped by the socio-personal and societal values, resulting in a cohesive and empathic identity. This entails that, in the Filipino customs, social cohesiveness, empathy, and moral responsibility are essential components of their identity.

Review of Related Literature

Friendships are essential components for development throughout one's life. For young people, it offers support, belonging, and a safety net to discover one's identity (König et al., 2023). During middle childhood is when the complexities of social environments arise, hence, friendships serve as a steady anchor for children to navigate these new and unfamiliar situations (Garrote et al., 2024). For CWAs, however, it is significantly a more fraught experience, given their distinct social-communicative profiles.

Traditional conceptualizations of friendship are, by definition, centered on neurotypical lenses. It emphasizes overt reciprocity and communication, which reflect NND standards but may not fully represent the experiences of PWAs. In effect, their differences in communication styles and social norms, such as honesty or "saving face," may lead to misunderstandings (Page et al., 2022). As Dean et al. (2023) states, PWAs stray away from typical models of socialization; they have their own ways of social interaction and play structure. For PWAs, there is safety in stability; accordingly, they prioritize predictability more than social expansion (Macchia et al., 2024; Finke et al., 2019; Lam et al., 2020). With this in mind, it illuminates alternative but equally valid ways to nurture meaningful and fulfilling friendships.

In the Philippines, the self and the community are deeply intertwined. This particular background and upbringing influence how people relate to one another. When everyone's lives are interconnected, inclusion is viewed as a personal responsibility rather than an absolute set of rules to follow (Solitario, 2022; Cañete & del Castillo, 2022; Merza et al., 2022). Paralleling this perspective, current literature on neurodiversity contends that there is no one best way to relate with others. When empathy takes precedence over rigid clinical definitions of PWAs, true connection unfolds (Datu et al., 2022). *Pakikipagkapwa* is essentially about seeing people as an integral part of yourself and treating them as you want to be treated.

Friendship that arises from *kapwa* is a commitment to always respect each other's humanity, along with an emotional bond. People adjust, learn, and share that sense of belonging every day. Filipino relationships are not just about togetherness they highlight each person's dignity and the feeling that everyone belongs in the circle of "shared being" (Del Castillo & Eder, 2022; Santos, 2023).

Objectives of the Study

This study examined how CWA and NND children perceive and experience their friendships. Specifically, this study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do CWA and NND children describe the meaning of friendship?
2. How is the friendship between CWA and NND children formed?
3. How is the friendship between CWA and NND children maintained?
4. How do CWA treat their NND friends, and vice versa?

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations in the current study should be considered. First, the results may not accurately represent the experiences of children who need more support because only children with Level 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder were included, as this was the group that was accessible and feasible for participation. The study's seven CWA participants were all boys, and five of the seven dyads were opposite-sex pairs, which may have affected the

relational dynamics. The geographical limitation of the results was also noted, as all participants were recruited from the Bulacan area. This may not be representative of the experiences of other children from different geographical locations with diverse social, educational, and cultural backgrounds (especially in

a multicultural country like the Philippines). The study's findings may not fully account for age-related changes in social identity formation that occur as children grow older, given that the age groups were not categorized distinctly per strata (e.g. Grades 1 to 3, and 4 to 6).

Conceptual Framework

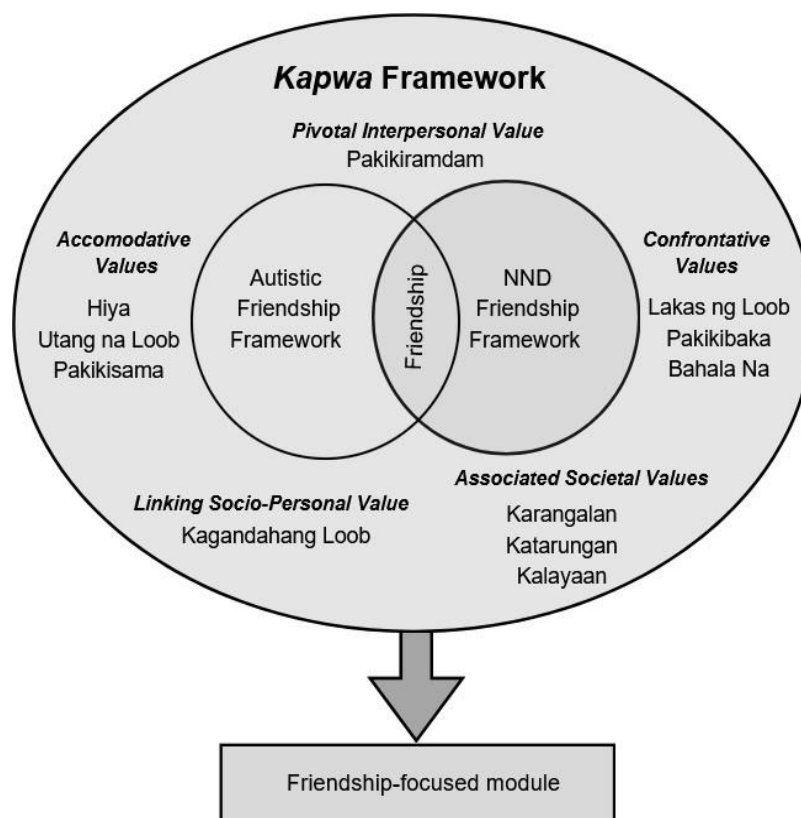


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

As shown in *Figure 1*, the study's conceptual framework outlines the crossroads of cross-neurotype friendships (CWA–NND), as governed by the overarching concept of *kapwa*. Enclosing the model is the outermost circle which illustrates the *kapwa* framework and the values that encompass it, as detailed in the study's Theoretical Framework.

The Autistic framework is encapsulated on the left circle, which highlights idiosyncratic communication styles and preferences. On the flipside, the NND framework is captured in the right circle, consisting of the neurotypical and conventional way of engaging and interacting, emphasizing the importance of consistent

interaction and group cohesion. At the intersection of these frameworks lie the overlap between the shared experiences. Within this space, differences are considerably navigated, resulting in friendship. It is through the *kapwa* value that these cross-neurotype relationships harbor mutual understanding, as the line separating between the two is blurred. The study's practical output represents the producible educational modules that translate the findings into inclusive practices. The research outcomes serve as a baseline for the development of informative materials, supporting the formation of friendships in cross-neurotypes school environments.

The study advances the goal of promoting early intervention for learners with autism. By examining these bonds in middle childhood, it goes further than simple 'placement' within a social system. An informed understanding of the support that the children need ensures that they are meaningfully added; it makes for a profound social inclusion over seamless assimilation into their educational institutions.

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, which allows researchers to capture a person's lived experiences (Lim, 2024). It enabled the researchers to gain insights into the phenomenon being studied while being able to probe further into the participants' unique experiences within a dyad. The social constructivist paradigm was used in the study for its emphasis on viewing reality as co-constructed by individuals through social interaction, cultural contexts, and shared meanings (Kouam, 2024). It is precisely within this worldview wherein friendship is understood as a dynamic process cultivated by children's interactions with others. The paradigm focusing on subjective interpretation lent itself well to the study's desire to highlight the actual accounts of the children—putting heavy emphasis on how friendships between them were established, negotiated, and regulated.

To maximize the richness of the participants' data, a phenomenological design was utilized for its ability to describe and interpret lived experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring friendship through external definitions, this design uncovered the essence of how participants constructed and interpreted their shared yet diverse meanings of friendship within the dyad. It unmasked how the concept of *kapwa* was enacted through the interactions between CWA and NND children.

Participants

The study implemented a purposive criterion sampling technique. This allowed the inclusion of individuals who could provide rich and relevant information about the phenomenon being studied, using inclusion criteria (Memon et al., 2025). In this case, criterion sampling was utilized to identify schools that

offer inclusive education or Special Needs Education (SNED) programs within Bulacan. After selecting the schools, purposive sampling was again used to identify the target participants based on predetermined criteria.

With the help of SNED specialist of the participating schools in Bulacan, participants were identified based on the following criteria: (a) both children must be enrolled in the school; (b) both children must be between 6 and 12 years old; (c) the CWA must have a formal diagnosis of level 1 Autism Spectrum Disorder by a licensed pediatrician or psychologist using DSM-5 diagnostic criteria, while the NND child must not present any developmental delays or disabilities as perceived by both their teachers and parents; and (d) both children must demonstrate the ability to respond to questions. Friendship pairs were identified based on the following criteria: (a) they recognize each other as friends; (b) consistent interaction must be confirmed by both parents and teachers; and (c) they must have known each other for at least six months. Six months was the minimum duration, as previous studies have shown that it is the threshold of friendship beyond which stability and mutual understanding are assured (Chang & Locke, 2016; Locke et al., 2017).

The aforementioned criteria were selected for the following reasons: the age range of 6 to 12 years falls within the middle childhood period, spanning Grades 1 to 6 under the Department of Education's 2019 guidelines. This period is a critical phase for developing complex and intimate friendship concepts necessary for articulating friendship (Kitts & Leal, 2021). The formal DSM-5 diagnosis for Level 1 ASD generally implies that the participants have the necessary cognitive and verbal abilities for qualitative data collection, while the NND peer will help provide a clearer context (American Psychiatric Association, 2022). The selection criteria for friendship were designed to confirm that their relationship is validated by mutual recognition and that a friendship of at least 6 months has been established (Vieth et al., 2022).

The study collected data from seven pairs, one over the number recommended by Creswell (1998), thereby ensuring data richness. In

addition, Akyıldız and Ahmed (2021) supported this with a similar recommendation, stating that a minimum of six participants is adequate for phenomenological studies seeking to understand socially constructed meanings in depth.

Instruments

Two tools were utilized for data collection. First, through a modified scrapbook activity, adapted from Fox and Asbury's (2024) instrument. Basic questions, emojis, and drawing activities were used in alignment with the study's research objectives. It served as a source of preliminary data for the researchers and had already been utilized in similar contexts (Fox & Asbury, 2024; Ellis, 2016). The scrapbook was modified to include questions regarding their relationship as opposed to the original questions regarding "idealized friendships." The modifications were made in order to delve deeper into the relationship of the dyads and to compare and contrast how each one saw and felt about their friendship. The scrapbook method was deemed reliable in qualitative research, as it makes information accessible, multimodal, and collaborative, consequently reducing bias and increasing the accuracy of what it aims to capture from the children (Walling-Wefelmeyer, 2020). The scrapbook included prompts such as "*Who is your friend?*" and "*What is friendship for you?*" to help participants gain a basic understanding of their current friendship.

Secondly, a semi-structured interview schedule was used to deepen probing of responses. This guide was used for its flexibility, allowing the interviewer to restructure the question order to accommodate participants' answers and gain a richer understanding of emerging themes in the interview (Ruslin et al., 2022). The interview schedule contained questions such as, "*What interests do you share?*" and "*When someone fights your friend, what do you do?*"

Both the interview guide and the scrapbook were available in English and Filipino to accommodate participants' language preferences. They were verified by three professionals, one psychometrician and two SNED specialists.

Procedures

Data gathering took place in three stages: first, rapport building was conducted through casual conversation or simple games to establish trust and put the children at ease. From the researchers' internship experience at a SNED center, this was an effective method for building rapport and maintaining engagement with children with special needs, such as those with autism. Second, the participants engaged in a scrapbook activity in which they described friendship. Finally, the dyads were interviewed to flesh out information from the scrapbook and to delve deeper into the pair's dynamics.

Data collection for each pair was conducted separately in one room. One interviewer per child was assigned in order to facilitate a smoother process and richer data flow, providing familiarity for both participants in the study. According to Caldwell (2013), this separate approach to interviewing a pair can still be classified as dyadic interviewing, as it continues to take into account both participants' accounts while also valuing each individual's perspective. Thereafter, the participants of each school were revisited to reaffirm the statements to ensure the accuracy of the data and clarify any ambiguities.

Data Analysis

To deeply investigate how these cross-neurotype relationships function, Thematic Analysis (RTA) by Braun and Clarke (2021) was used. They outlined six intensive steps to allow for an accurate coding process. The researchers followed it rigorously; they familiarized themselves with the data, drafted initial codes, then grouped them into themes. The themes were then continuously reviewed, then refined, until the study's findings were documented. Experts in social sciences, psychometry, and SNED were consulted for quality checks. The three external validators helped review and approve the final themes of the study.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers received clearance from their university's Ethics Research Committee (ERC) prior to data collection. The researchers followed the Data Privacy Act of 2012 and the

Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP) guidelines. Parental consent and child assent forms were also obtained before data collection.

During the interview and play sessions, the researchers monitored the safety and comfort of the participants. Substantial break times were provided, in which food and water were offered to the children. The session was promptly terminated when the children expressed any reluctance or disinterest. A later follow-up session was scheduled after confirming to the parent and child that they wish to continue.

A labeling system was applied to maintain confidentiality. Alphanumeric identifiers were utilized to preserve clarity, where A1 refers to the CWA and B1 refers to the NND child of the first dyad, A2 and B2 for the second dyad, and so on.

Result

Understanding of Friendship among CWA-NND Friends

The meanings that children assign to their friendships reveal the rich emotional depth that was born from their interactions. From their interview statements, the following themes emerged: (1) Source of Emotional Security, (2) Embodying Kindness, (3) Lasting Connection, and (4) Personification of the Concept of Friendship. For them, friendship is not just casual acquaintanceship; they describe it more deeply and personally than that. They anchored their definitions on their positive experiences, to the point that they epitomized the concept of friendship itself. Evident from their responses, friendship is not merely a social connection that benefits only one person. Instead, friendship is an avenue where both sides find contentment and security.

Source of Emotional Security. For the children, the relationship offers more than companionship; it brings them stability and happiness that grounds their emotional state. This emotional grounding can be surmised from the following statements:

“Happiness. Because when you have friends, you are happy.” (B6)

“If I have a problem, there is someone I can go to.” (B5)

The statements indicate that beyond the social connection, the children define friendship as a source of positive emotion. Through their connection, happiness is achieved. For them, these feelings of happiness are due to the positive treatment that their friend gives them. Evident from the statements, they are happy because of their friend. This particular happiness they feel is what is imprinted on them as the meaning of friendship, showing that these children view friendship in terms of their emotions. Their bond becomes a source of emotional security and stability; their friend influences and contributes to the positive mood that they experience.

Embodying Kindness. Kindness was described as a defining quality of the children’s friendship as indicated by the following statements:

“Friendship is about being kind.” (A6)

“A6 is different because he is like a good friend to me.” (B6)

“B2 gives me friendship and then love and kindness.” (A2)

“Friends means... You can be kind.” (B2)

The emphasis on kindness suggests that moral behavior, rather than convenience or social standing, is the foundation of friendship for the participants. Through acts of kindness, the children determine whom they consider a friend. The researchers infer that kindness is a desirable trait that children look for in their friends. With kindness intrinsically linked to a caring nature, the trait warrants that they are well taken care of by their friend. Alongside this, kindness is not only sought after by the children, but also something they give to their friends, as statements imply. This means that for the children, friendship is not only about receiving kindness but also about giving kindness to others, making it a reciprocal act. For them, the concept of friendship embodies kindness.

Lasting Connection. For some of the participants, friendship was defined as a lasting

connection, one that ensures relatedness and attachment despite the distance and persists through time. The emphasis on an enduring connection can be gleaned from the statements below:

"You're connected (so) that I can begin to share with you." (A5)

"Distance doesn't define how you're gonna interact with each other because if you guys (are) genuinely friends, you have this spark—even (during) the months you are not talking, it's gonna come back." (B7)

This relational proximity is followed by candor; the children displayed an openness to share once they have that sense of connection with their peers. From their statements, a connected friendship entails a disclosure of the self to the other, and it is not solely dependent on physical proximity. However, the participants also stated that such a connection should not be so shallow that distance hinders it, nor should time erode it. For them, the connection between friends endures no matter how far apart they are or how seldom they see each other.

Personification of the Concept of Friendship. Several participants were unable to give a concrete definition of friendship when asked what it meant. Rather, they named a specific individual right away:

"Oh, it's B2." (A2)

"Friend means A3/B3." (A3, B3)

For participants who answered friendship not as a concept or feeling but as a person, one possible explanation is that they see this person as the perfect friend. This perspective may be explained by exemplar theory, in which Bybee (2025) defines exemplars as cognitive shortcuts. When a person is described as an exemplar, they are the epitome of a collection of positive experiences that others are compared to. Framing it in this manner, the researchers can infer that, due to their positive relationship and a favorable treatment, the children epitomize friendship as that particular person in their social world.

Pathways to Friendship Formation among CWA–NND children

Friendship formation between CWA and NNDs thrives on the universal pillars of any human relationship: shared interests and organic strengthening through common activities. When analyzed, the statements generated the following themes: (1) Nurturing Bonds through Mutual Engagement, and (2) Bridging Connections through Social Scaffolding. The themes display that despite the perceived limitations of neurodiversity, they can build relationships that are indistinguishable from those of NNDs. Alongside this, adult involvement may also establish and facilitate friendships by promoting interaction; nonetheless, it is through children's own accord and interest that pushes the relationship forward. Hence, friendship formation in this context can be understood as a dynamic interplay of individual agency and community involvement.

Nurturing Bonds through Mutual Engagement. The initial stage of friendship formation is often characterized as the discovery of similar interests and bonding over shared activities. Bonding activities between children generally draw on their shared interests. This is supported by the statements below:

"A6 likes drawing and I also like drawing..." (B6)

"We both like to play in the playground." (B1)

From rudimentary interactions, they are able to progress their relationship to talking about matters outside shared engagement. A sample statement reads:

"We also have things to talk about... when we have places to go." (A4)

Similarity is pivotal for friendships, as it establishes compatibility and is crucial for lasting relationships. It develops their bond from mere strangers to friends. During this early phase of the friendship, they start to get to know each other, what their likes and dislikes are; there is more emphasis on what their

similarities are rather than what separates them from the other person.

Bridging Connections through Social Scaffolding. Friendships do not always form in a vacuum; they may also be nurtured by other figures outside the pair, with the guiding role of social scaffolding. Teachers and families in the child's social world are authority figures who also extend their roles as bridges to friendship.

In the case of the study, the teachers and parents of both CWA and NNDs have also been involved in building the relationship between the pairs:

"Even mom, even dad, even other teachers." (A3)

"Well... randomly, teacher puts me next to A7 because when they saw when I am beside to A7, they see A7 was behave." (B7)

As indicated by their statements, teachers and parents offer social scaffolding that initiates interactions between the pairs. Parents and teachers act as facilitators who create opportunities for contact that may not naturally occur due to the differences between the children. When there is adult involvement and social awareness is present, they facilitate the development and continuity of these friendships. The connection is kept alive and bright through the adults' collaborative efforts to push the children's friendship forward.

Actions that Sustain CWA-NND Friendships

Interpersonal relationships cannot persist on their own. In order to protect its longevity, both individuals must make deliberate efforts to cultivate it. Two themes emerged: (1) Sustained Togetherness, and (2) Upholding Social Harmony. For the children, relational harmony is not achieved by chance but one that must be actively worked on. It is through this shared effort that their friendship remains a safe and positive space. Driven by the desire and motivation to keep their friendship alive, these behaviors serve as expressions of relational preservation.

Sustained Togetherness. Pursuing a prolonged connectedness was how the children maintained their friendship, as reflected below:

"I see my friend every day." (A1, A3)

"Sad po, hinihintay ko po siya." (A4)

"I want to be friends forever." (A3)

Based on the accounts of the children, regular interactions help build emotional investment in the bond. As shown by their statements of feeling sad during one's absence, the bond is not merely a casual one, but one that has developed an emotional connection strong enough to feel lonely during the other's absence. Coupled with their statements expressing the want for their friendship to last "forever," suggest they desire for their bond to endure for a long period of time. It is now the children's conscious decision to commit to their friendship, where routinary presence transforms into emotional attachment, leading to a connection sustained over time.

Upholding Social Harmony. Conflicts are kept to a minimum, and this has been displayed as a proactive behavior by the children. They consciously keep their interactions with friends as something positive and secure, as described below:

"It is okay for others to join us, because if they join, it's merry." (A4)

"If I'm busy, I tell him to play later." (B6)

"Never." (B6)

Expressions for the desire to maintain social harmony were noted. The children value collective enjoyment over strict exclusive groups, as indicated by their willingness to include others. All the while, they have also shown a capacity to set clear boundaries, such as deferring play time at a later time. These behaviors illustrate their social awareness, managing smooth interpersonal relationships at a young age. When probed about having potential conflicts with their friend, stern responses of "never" came about. One explanation from the participant states that they see conflict as a "bad thing" that must be avoided; it can be

inferred that active prevention to it also takes in the form of making adjustments. As previously discussed, children defined friendship as embodying kindness. Their behavior is shaped by this understanding; for what they think to be a bad thing to do is simply unacceptable for their friendship.

Interpersonal Dynamics in CWA–NND Friendships

With the children's description of how they responded to the situation and to their friend's needs, it reveals the level of emotional intelligence and social awareness they possess. Three themes emerged from this inquiry: (1) Displaying Emotional Attunement, (2) Providing Instrumental Support, and (3) Responding with Reciprocal Generosity. As one child demonstrates prosocial behavior toward their friend, the other returns these acts with the virtue of generosity in mind. This reciprocal process consolidates their commitment to the friendship, thus upholding an implicit agreement of fairness.

Displaying Emotional Attunement. Emotional attunement calls for the ability to perceive emotional cues and act on them. The children utilized this mechanism in order to maintain a supportive, positive relationship, as described below:

"He's not judgmental... when I talk (about) my problems (with) my other friends, they give me criticism when I need empathy. A7 understands me so well." (B7)

"B2 is nice and sensitive about me." (A2)

"If he's sad, I'm sad, too—because that's the vibe he expresses." (B7)

These children show appreciation to those who listen and pay attention to emotional signals. The responses indicated that valuing one's emotions are seen as an important aspect of feeling safe in the relationship as much as the action of fixing problems or correcting others. The participant's description of "the vibe" is particularly insightful. The vibe in this case, indicates an emotional connection that goes beyond what is openly said. It pertains to the nonverbal cues that they observe, as indicated

by B7's comment of "because that's the vibe he expresses." Their responses illustrate affective empathy by their capacity to physically or emotionally feel what the other person is feeling, going against presupposed psychological assumptions between cross-neurotype pairings.

Providing Instrumental Support. The children's statements on providing instrumental support display protective actions. They perceive the act of protecting their friend as a deed one must do for a friend, as reported below:

"I stop them. I tell them not to be rude or call slurs." (A5)

"By saving B6 from bullying." (A6)

"I protect him, because he doesn't deserve that." (B7)

The children demonstrate the ability to recognize social injustice. They even respond to it by defending their friends, showing how they are willing to take action to upkeep the dignity of their friend. The act of protecting serves as both an expression of affection and, as a sign of keeping the dignity of the friendship, which displays moral position. With this, the bond between them is strongly reinforced, allowing for their shared values to thrive. When witnessing their friend in trouble, these children do not remain passive; rather, they assume an active role in mediating peer behavior in defending their friend from the actions of those who mean them harm. In these children, a sense of justice and social accountability can be seen developing in their simple acts of stopping fights and calling out unwarranted behavior.

Besides these actions depicting direct safeguarding, the children also shared gestures of assisting in academic tasks:

"If he's (having) a hard time in Filipino, I just tap (him) into (the) shoulder and I try to help him." (B7)

"B6 assists me... with hard tasks, like Filipino." (A6)

A concrete proof of friendship according to these children is shown when one helps another in various academic concerns such as completing tasks, sharing answers, and

offering encouragement during moments of academic difficulty. Going beyond the mere expression of sympathy, these children are shown to actively lend a hand in order to actively lessen their friend's academic hardship. With these accounts, it can be surmised that friendship does not stop at emotional support. The NND children extended their aid in offering academic support to their CWA friend, and it involved cooperative problem-solving as well. One participant's account of tapping the shoulder of her friend to offer help also conveys physical assurance. A combination of reassurance with academic assistance exhibits the capacity for emotional co-regulation with peers.

Responding with Reciprocal Generosity.

Present in the children's friendship is a balanced give-and-receive. These displays of reciprocal generosity are evident from the statements below:

"It shows generosity..." (A7)

"Because like if he gave me like something, a good drawing, I (would) also give a good drawing." (B6)

Acts of kindness are significant contributions to a shared relationship, rather than actions to be viewed through individualistic or self-serving narratives. From their statements, the children view friendship as being shaped by fairness and reciprocity. Generosity is characterized by a sustained pattern of mutual care, not as a unilateral sacrifice.

Discussion

Across the children's personal reflection, it is apparent that CWA-NND friendship offers a distinct window to the core Filipino value of *kapwa*. Not to be undermined as incidental ties, but to be appreciated as deep relational bonds nurtured by a sense of shared self. Taken as a whole, the accounts as reported by the children all trace back to manifestations of *pakikipagkapwa*. By culturally grounding these interactions, *kapwa* is construed as the central framework from which these relational bonds are understood.

The children in the study enacted kindness not out of obligation; it is a practice that comes off intuitively in response to their *kapwa*. Their responses to certain situations display how they possess emotional intelligence, taking the course of action based on what they think is best. Drawing from their statements, the children displayed emotional intelligence in sensing and reacting to their friend's needs. *Kagandahang loob* is exemplified in the children's statements wherein they show an understanding of what their friends need. Having these statements corroborated by their friend shows the value of using the dyadic interview format.

In essence, friendship is perceived as a safe space, where bonds are nurtured from a sense of *kagandahang-loob*. The connections they formed within their friendship developed a strong bond that does not seek to take, but to give; a connection grounded in genuine giving rather than obligation. The direct translation of this Filipino phrase is 'beauty-of-will,' reflecting the nature of one's relationship towards the *kapwa* (Reyes, 2015). He further elaborated that a person with *kagandahang loob* essentially has an affective concern for others, and therefore displays willingness to help their *kapwa* in times of need.

Building on this understanding, participants highlighted friendship as an emotional bond that goes beyond surface-level closeness and likeness to oneself. This result refutes the study of Calder et al (2013) wherein they state that CWAs merely define friendship through companionship rather than through their emotional intimacy and connection. While most literature has involved only the NND population, the present study affirms that there are some CWA that experience friendship dynamics similar to their NND peers. Aligned with this is Crompton et al.'s (2020) study, underscoring that CWA possesses an inherent capacity to foster meaningful relationships. Their work posits that these connections are often hindered by a difference in communication styles rather than an innate social deficit.

Through this qualitative inquiry, it challenges the pathological and deficit-based notions that often frames CWA as uninterested in interpersonal ties, or incapable of emotional reciprocity (O'Connor et al., 2022). The study's

CWA and NND participants expressed genuine enthusiasm in preserving the social relationships they have. This is further evidenced by their desire for the friendships to continue as they grow older and by their statements that they wish the friendships to last “forever.”

The results validate that both CWAs and NNDs do live out their social roles beyond functional expectations, drawing instead from a place of affective connection. It is supported by Akhtar and Jaswal's (2019) study, which found that CWA have an innate desire for social connection. The authors argue that due to conventional research focusing on normative social signals, CWAs are often misunderstood due to the differences by which they operate, with respect to what is considered the norm. However, the present study looks past these models and shifts to a cultural lens that can appreciate authentic relational bonds.

The Filipino concept of *kapwa*, which emphasizes moral responsibility toward others, aligns closely with children's interpretation of kindness. As the participants stated, “We're equal” and “Even others, I help,” it expands the theme of kindness outside close friendships. This means that their caring attitude is not merely exclusive to their immediate social circle, it goes beyond it to include those even outside it.

The idea that even *Ibang Tao* (others) are still a part of their common humanity is reflected in this (Poolokasingham, 2015). Intimacy, self-disclosure, and mutual satisfaction are frequently the main ways that Western frameworks conceptualize friendship (Rawlins, 2009); however, according to the current study's findings, an individual's moral character especially kindness is deeply valued by Filipino children as an essential element of friendship, which suggests that Filipino sociality is inherently communal. Because friendship is framed here more as an ethical orientation than as a personal preference, the current data thus partially refute Western individual-centered definitions.

Shifting to how these friendships begin, accounts of shared interests and activities being the start of friendships are consistent with other studies, such as Figeac and Favre (2021), which explains how similarity precedes

association; and Srivastav et al. (2024), which states that homophily, pertaining to similarity of interests, is the basis of social connection. These studies, along with the participants' collected data, embody the expression “birds of the same feather flock together.”

Within the framework of *kapwa*, this gradual growth in the bond between the children from sharing interests with a stranger to later developing into a deep friendship illustrates the progression of their relationship along the “*Antas ng Pakikipagkapwa*” (roughly translated as *levels of social interaction*). As explained by Santiago and Enriquez (1976), these levels of social interaction denote the depth of a bond in a relationship, starting with “*pakikitungo*” (simple civility) to “*pakikiisa*” (being one with). They further explain that each level can be classified according to the set of behaviors it entails, ranging from uninvolved civility to identification with another person.

Looking at the study from this lens, the initial stage of finding commonalities with strangers and later on developing into friendships, shows the progression from *pakikitungo* (civility) to, at the very least, *pakikipag-palagayang loob* (mutual trust), as it is the first level in what Santiago and Enriquez (1976) considered as the *Hindi Ibang Tao* category of *pakikipagkapwa*. According to Kobayashi et al. (2024), the act of trying to connect and communicate with others is an act of “finding the unity of the self in the other” a behavioral manifestation of *pakikipagkapwa*. Alongside these similar interests (drawing and journalism) and shared activities (drawing, talking, playing tag) between the children, it also showcases that the building of friendship between CWA and NNDs mirrors universal developmental patterns, where “doing” precedes “being” friends.

While not challenging prior conceptualizations of friendship development, analyzing how children form friendships through the lens of *Kapwa Theory* offers a more culturally grounded approach to friendship formation. It also affirms that the concepts of *kapwa* (or *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*) apply not only to NNDs but also to PWAs.

However, beyond formation, while shared interests and activities may be a starting point for friendships, if no initial interaction occurs,

then the establishment of friendships becomes impossible. This hurdle can be addressed by involving parents and teachers in establishing an initial interaction. As explained by Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd (2019), social scaffolding can facilitate friendship formation by initiating interactions between children; a notion reflected in the data collected from the participants.

In the context of the Philippines, this level of involvement and social scaffolding can be viewed as a form of "*pakikisangkot*." As explained by Marcelino (1990), *pakikisangkot* involves a deeper form of participation and involvement; it entails responsibility as an active participant or facilitator. However, in order for a person to enact *pakikisangkot*, they must have a close relationship with their *kapwa*, in this case, the children. In the study, those who are *nakikisangkot* are: the teachers, with whom the children spend time every day in school, and the children's parents. Teachers encourage the formation of friendships by placing children next to each other, fostering interaction through proximity. For the parents, some participants have stated that their parents schedule time to go out with each other's family to deepen the bond between their friends.

As the children recount, the adults surrounding them were not merely spectators, they also acted as facilitators of the children's friendship. Through acts of encouragement and initiation, they helped the friendship flourish. Despite this, the children's accounts highlight that though parents and teachers may encourage the friendship, they still decide on themselves whether they want to continue the friendship and deepen their bond. Evident from the interviews, it is through the children's own accord that the friendship persisted; the desire to continue it and the efforts behind it were observed from the participants.

For both sides of the dyads, everyday interactions are not merely routines but become foundations to what has been described as social anchors (Fram et al., 2024). For neurodivergent individuals, these anchors are especially vital, as predictability and familiarity with actions serve as prerequisites for deep social engagement with peers. Yacat (2013) also states that one of the factors that helps

differentiate the *Antas ng Pakikipagkapwa* from *Ibang Tao* to *Hindi Ibang Tao* is the *dalas ng pagkikita* (frequency of interaction). This goes to illustrate that the regularity of contact, of seeing and interacting with each other every day, helped in developing the friendship from *pakikitungo* (civility) to *pakikiisa* (being one with).

As defined by Enriquez (1992), *pakikiisa* is a deeper commitment or involvement with another person, where the line between the self and the other is most blurred. In the context of the NND participant who stated that their friend is "30% of her life," the state of *pakikiisa* is further solidified by her stating that she "feels happy when he is happy... sad when he is sad." Additional support for this is the CWA friend's statement that he is always ready to defend his friend, illustrating what Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino (2000) add to the definition of *pakikiisa* as solidarity with the other person. Finally, both sides stating that they are each other's "best" and "closest" friend implies that the relationship goes beyond base-level friendship into a more deeply intertwined relationship.

While previous literature suggests that cross-neurotype friendships are fragile due to a difference in interaction styles (Tsou et al., 2024; Sharman & Seedorf, 2025), the findings indicate that when these children build friendships, they not only build them as temporary relationships but also wish for these relationships to be durable social networks that will last into the future. This challenges outdated notions stating that cross-neurotype friendships are merely one-sided or charitable acts by NNDs.

Beyond stability, *pakikiramdam* is also a trait very much evident among the participants. What makes the participants of the study to be remarkably sensitive are those actions showing adjustments. The children's willingness to move their playtime or include others show how they are very accommodating to their friends' mood. Consistent with the work of Garrote et al. (2023), the children are willing to overlook their individual preferences in order to prioritize relational preservation. This also explains how participants only responded with "never" or "no" when asked about conflict

with their friend. While traditional developmental psychology might view this avoidance of conflict as a lack of assertiveness, grounded in the Filipino context, it is a manifestation of *pakikisama*. These findings mirror the findings of Jaga et al. (2023), wherein it is found that children tend to prioritize maintaining a positive relationship; adjusting their actions based on their friend's emotional state, showing a deep care as to how their friend will react.

When put forth into actions, relational sensitivity represents a more layered interplay of social dynamics than basic interaction. Their behaviors indicate that they perceive their friend as someone to defend and care for. This goes past reductionist perspectives on autistic sociality, particularly because these actions did not result from an adult's instructions to them. These behaviors are unmistakably rooted from the children's recognition of their friend's needs. And, with this, a shift in perspective takes place—from an outsider (*Ibang Tao*) to treating them as “one of us” (*Hindi Ibang Tao*).

Confrontational acts, such as calling out peers who make fun of or insult their friend, indicates an understanding of justice. The children are willing to experience possible social scrutiny, which points to their dedication to uphold their loyalty to a friend. It depicts courage in action, because these behaviors are adversarial in nature. One participant recalled directly questioning and addressing the classmate who had shown relational aggression to her friend, which all highlights a proactive approach against interpersonal conflicts. The child openly advocates for their friend, wherein social action is utilized to better support peers in these environments (Lubon et al., 2024). In mixed-neurotype relationships, the role of empathy is heavily emphasized (Milton et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2022). In sum, the participants have shown an understanding of equality, which is succeeded by the sense of fairness in how they treat their friends.

In Filipino culture, these actions reflect several values discussed by Enriquez. The children's willingness to defend their friends showcases confrontational surface values, *lakas ng loob*, and *pakikibaka*. As Enriquez (1992) explained, these confrontative surface values are direct responses to injustice; it is the

value of Filipinos to instinctively fight back against those who inflict direct or indirect harm on them or their *kapwa*. On the other hand, their recognition of injustice done to their friend indicates that the children have an understanding of the societal value of *katarungan* (justice). In this sense, the children fighting against their friend's bullies display *lakas ng loob* and *pakikibaka* as they show willingness to defend their friend and recognize that bullying is an injustice (*kawalan ng katarungan*) that needs to be addressed.

Existing research underscores the importance of peer support in classrooms, which has been shown to significantly contribute across motivation, belonging, and academic achievement (Blömeke et al., 2017). Peer mediation, in this dynamic, acts as a go-between to access shared academic resources, such as the act of sharing and helping their classmate with answers in their school tasks. Further enhanced in this is the CWA's participation, because when social competence and inclusive intent is present, the process by which they become integrated runs more smoothly.

When kindness is returned to the giver, the virtue of generosity is portrayed. One participant, in stark contrast, acknowledged a limit to one's generosity. He stated that he cannot give all that he has, because he has to make sure everyone gets a share. A profound way to maintain relational balance is noted in this account, exemplifying an emerging distributive reasoning. Even more, *utang na loob* was even explicitly remarked by one participant, which signifies reciprocity grounded in a cultural moral framework. Viewed this way, reciprocity is perceived as greater than a transactional action; it merits a relational gesture for the other. Supported by Liu et al. (2026), it contends that moral responsibility does not weaken, but instead, reinforces social cohesion and strengthens one's connectedness with others (Liu et al., 2026).

Shared values lie at the center of their friendship. This emotional connection, when examined further, refutes conventional notions on neurodivergent individuals as lacking empathy in social context. Instead, the participants display what Maninang (2025) describes as emotional attunement, the ability to sense

and respond appropriately to a friend's affective state.

Grounded in *Sikolohiyang Pilipino*, the concept of *pakikiramdam* explains the deep affective connection people have to one another. Though already discussed in the previous section, *pakikiramdam* goes beyond keeping social harmony and involves getting a "feeling for" the other person through non-verbal cues. *Pakikiramdam*, as defined by Enriquez (1992), is the shared inner perception of people that manifests as heightened awareness and sensitivity toward others. Keeping social harmony is, in a sense, only a byproduct of acting with *pakikiramdam*. Given Filipinos' strong contextual orientation and reliance on non-verbal cues as much as on verbal ones, *pakikiramdam* becomes a pivotal value in socializing (Man-sukhani, 1989).

The children display *pakikiramdam* through the use of toys, play, and subtle actions to feel for their friend; it goes against literature that frames CWA as incapable of responding to emotions or non-verbal cues of those around them (Radford et al., 2025; Yeung, 2022). The data indicates that some CWA are not merely observing their friends' emotions but also navigating how to respond to them. This heightened sensitivity according to Del Castillo and Eder (2022) explains how despite longstanding social barriers and limited verbal cues, these children can sustain a shared self within the bond.

A worthwhile anecdote to mention is when prompted about their perceived difference about the CWA, there were two NND participants who shared that they were aware of the ASD diagnosis of their friend. From their body language, the researchers noted a sudden bashful attitude among the NND children. They whispered their confession that they were cognizant of their friend having autism. Yet, when accounting for the overall responses gathered from these two, a positive light shines upon their behavior and statements. Despite their awareness of the diagnosis, they still treated their friend the same. For the NND children, the CWA is not seen as the "other person"; the diagnosis did not alter their perception of their friend, nor did it diminish the sense of equality they perceive in the friendship.

All the while, *hiya* was present in these narratives. Abrupt shifts in tone and body language of these two participants were observed during the interview. Analyzed closely, these behaviors reflect the Filipino culture, *hiya*. It is often translated as shame, involving the fear of losing face in front of others (Lasquety-Reyes, 2016). And, when this is taken into consideration, the children lowered their voices to protect their CWA friend from experiencing shame. In the context of the study, the participants expressed *hiya* even though they did not directly verbalize it. As young as they are, the children were sensitive to a delicate matter a question of difference and they wanted to protect this information that reveals what may ostracize their friend further. Indeed, the NND friends acted this way to honor the dignity of their friend, not their own.

Dominant narratives on neurodivergent individuals also revolve around having an "empathy gap." However, the current study opposes these stereotypes to an extent. The findings suggest that the emotional connection between CWA and NNDs is not by chance; this connection is a deliberate product of value-laden interactions between children. Further, these behaviors are reflective of what authors Maninang (2025) and Cahapay (2020) refer to as moral attunement, which is described as the ability to sense and respond to a person's affective state. The study affirms what prior literature has contested against deficit-based models PWAs experience and exhibits a more nuanced form of empathy (Li et al., 2026; Simantov & Uzefovsky, 2024).

Across the CWA-NND dyads, friendship emerges as a deeply emotional and relational experience, in which happiness and kindness are strongly associated. The repeated emphasis on "being kind" suggests that for these children, friendship is experienced as goodness; likewise, friendship is enacted through moral behavior that brings them happiness. Even more so, kindness is treated as a central moral criterion of friendship for the children; it was described as the defining marker of closeness they have to that particular individual. From their statements, the researchers surmise that to be a friend is to exercise moral goodness. It is about extending one's goodness, of being

kind, to people whom one may consider as an “other.” Their statements of compassion and wanting their friend to be safe and happy is a testament to how *pakikipagkapwa* becomes a lived moral obligation, wherein they value interdependence through the perceived connection they have with their friends.

It is precisely this connection that bridges their identities as *kapwa*—displaying empathetic behavior and responses toward their friends. The value of *kapwa* is recognized in these accounts, as it demonstrates the understanding of relational identity being part of their own. For them, friendship also means returning what is given to them by their friend, whether it be acts of kindness or responsive emotional support. Within this moral and relational framework, love also emerges, expressed through care, patience, concern for the friend’s well-being, and acts of protection and support. Friendship for these children is not only about kindness and empathy but also about actively seeking each other’s happiness and security, demonstrating that love is enacted through both moral and relational commitment.

From the present study, it can be inferred that CWA and NND alike are capable of reciprocating with acts of generosity, emotional care, and kindness. It challenges the notion that deficit-based models have been upheld in the past. In that line of thinking, the model presupposes a hierarchical friendship, framing the relationship as an asymmetrical one, primarily due to the social deficit of people with autism. However, based on the results, the friendship between CWA and NNDs is a constant give-and-receive, as both sides offer support to each other within their relationship. Alongside this, the results challenge the notion of the Double Empathy Problem. While the theory proposes a disconnect between the differing neurotypes, in the context of the study, no such barrier existed between the two. This may be attributed to the fact that both these neurotypes function within a shared cultural currency of *pakikiramdam* (relational sensitivity). By treating the friend not as ‘Ibang Tao’ (an outsider) but as an extension of the self, both CWA and NND children intuitively adjusted their behavioral expectations to preserve social harmony.

In the case of the participants, the disconnect predicted by the Double Empathy Problem did not manifest, proving that the theory is not a universal constant.

Both sides of the friendship have shown the capacity to adjust and accommodate without compromising their own needs. Conversely, the study affirms what Milton and colleagues (2012) strongly proposed: the interactions between PWAs and NNDs can be understood as differences in empathy, not empathy deficiencies. Since the earliest conception of the Asperger’s diagnosis, autism has suffered from a misinformed social understanding of the condition (Ekdahl, 2023). Central to this perspective is the premise that disability is an inherently cultural construct. How the diagnosis is labeled and construed will inevitably dictate how society builds its framework of understanding around it. One study claimed that individualist societies view disability as a phenomenon requiring discrete intervention, whereas collectivist communities have traditionally accepted disability as a group-based phenomenon requiring acceptance from its community (Meyer, 2010). In this day and age, the present study contributes to the decolonization of disability—particularly in the context of Filipinos’ deep-seated sense of social harmony. The study’s findings reveal that both the CWA and NND children express their love and care for their friend in their own way.

Every child must be respected as an individual, focusing on his or her unique exceptionalities rather than on what he or she cannot do. Likewise, one’s belongingness to a collectivist culture should thereby celebrate the child’s inclusion within the community. It is imperative that the long-standing notions of reductionism of disabilities be absolved. Recognizing them not just as individuals but as an extension of oneself is the essence of what is deemed a fundamental Filipino value—seeing the self in others, as *kapwa*. As Rhodes et al. (2025) and Kilby (2023) argued, a nation’s approach to disability equality should be more nuanced, focusing heavily on a person’s strengths and being culturally informed. When policy-makers are guided by cultural and indigenous paradigms, they become informed of the shifting trends in the community. Advocacies come true to life

once they successfully navigate the construction of disability-inclusive societies.

While these insights reflect universal processes of childhood friendship, it underscores the considerable influence of Filipino values such as *kapwa*, *pakikiramdam*, and *pakikisama*. Moving past diagnostic labels, the stories that were gleaned from Filipino children reveals that friendship is neither defined nor constrained by one's cognitive profiles, but is nurtured by empathy and genuine care for one's *kapwa*. Ultimately, it affirms that the sense of shared humanity transcends the boundaries of neurological differences.

Conclusion

For the children, friendship is no mere social connection, it is an emotional bond in which taking care of each other is reciprocal. Just like most other friendships, the connection starts off through discovery of similarities and shared activities. The adults may help start off the friendship, but the decision to continue the established bond rests on the children's own accord to it. It is accompanied by feelings of empathy and a sense of justice to protect each other, which further enriches their bond. *Pakikipagkapwa* is therefore exemplified in the friendship between these children, where goodness is felt and recognized even before it is concretely conceptualized. It is captured in this affective progression: the recognition and enactment of the guiding moral value (*kapwa*) necessitates the entire span of the friendship (*pakikipagkaibigan*).

Taken altogether, the study highlights the value of *kapwa* is first experienced, through kindness and empathy, from which point friendship is kindled. The children's character formation is rooted in this dynamic interplay of daily social exchanges, from which values are embedded. This moves them towards an authentic Filipino identity, actualizing inclusive ideals into reality. When relationships are guided by the *kapwa* value, cross-neurotype friendships may actually flourish in an environment that embraces them for who they are.

Recommendations

These findings look past simple curriculum designs; it underscores the importance of

action-led seminars and workshops. Schools may conduct these training sessions for their teachers' to effectively interact with neurodivergent learners. Implementing policy recommendations transforms these findings into practice, which could include structured buddy systems. With this, it could foster natural interactions for learners with autism outside class hours and aid in social integration.

Case studies and triangulation methods are potential approaches that future researchers may employ. Gathering a multi-faceted information from their parents, therapists, teachers, and classmates may further enhance the findings on the CWA-NND friendship. An equally viable design would be longitudinal research, specifically, by looking into how children's concept of friendship develops and changes over time.

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The main findings (novelty) and why they are important and useful:

- Existing literature on friendship among Children with Autism (CWA) has primarily been framed around same-neurotype interactions and deficit-based perspectives that only portray autism as a social limitation. The Non-Neurodivergent (NND) peers, who are individuals without any form of neurodivergence, are often positioned as passive supporters within their friendships with CWA. This cross-neurotype pairing is generally diminished to one-sided relationships rather than as active participants of a meaningful bond. Most research is based on Western, individual-centered ideologies, focusing only on either the CWA or the NND's experiences, seldom taking into account both of their perspectives. Hence, this results in a prevailing reductionist viewpoint that fails to capture the mutual and relational dynamics of friendships between CWA and NND children. Amid the nuances surrounding this cross-neurotype friendship, the cultural and emotional aspects of their relationship remain underexplored in a collectivist country such as the Philippines. Therefore, a crucial gap remains in understanding how Filipino CWA and NND children make sense of their friendship, given the individual differences that every person possesses. Regarding cultural dynamics, the study sought to comprehend how these children embody the concept of *kapwa*, pertaining to a shared self that challenges exclusionary views. It reframes

CWA–NND friendships as a mutual recognition they have for their *kapwa*, rather than one that ultimately serves to isolate the other.

- Across the CWA – NND dyads, friendship emerges as a deeply emotional and relational experience, in which happiness and kindness are strongly associated. The repeated emphasis on “being kind” suggests that for these children, friendship is experienced as goodness; likewise, friendship is enacted through moral behavior that brings them happiness. Kindness is treated as a central moral criterion of friendship; it was described as the defining marker of closeness to that particular individual. Their statements of compassion and desire for their friend to be safe and happy are a testament to how *pakikipagkapwa* becomes a lived moral obligation, in which they value interdependence through the perceived connection they have with their friends.
- The initial stage of friendship formation is characterized by the discovery of similar interests and bonding over shared activities. Finding shared interests explains how participants expressed similarities with their friends, with hobbies like drawing. Engaging in shared activities means that the children perform activities together, such as playing, writing, and participating in school competitions. Communicating and interacting highlight how important talking and simple interactions are in developing friendships. Similarity is pivotal for friendships as it establishes compatibility between friends, which is crucial for lasting relationships. From rudimentary interactions, they can progress their relationship to discussing matters beyond shared engagement.
- Social facilitators of the children's friendships are the adults surrounding them, namely, family members and teachers. They create opportunities inside and outside the school, which may not naturally occur between young people. Adult involvement helps these friendships flourish, but the decision to strengthen the bond deeper rests on the children's hands.

- With regular interactions comes stability for both children. They have emphasized the importance of frequent contact, and that feelings of sadness arise during the absence of their friend. The connection, as perceived by the participants, is more than casual interaction—it bears emotional weight for the child. Repeated expressions of wishing the friendship to last “forever” suggest that they view the bond as ever-lasting, not just a fleeting presence in their lives.
- The participants actively fostered a peaceful environment where adjustments are able to be made and conflicts are kept to a minimum. The children are willing to adjust their actions for their friend based on the social situation. Their willingness to establish boundaries demonstrates an understanding of managing relationships without damaging them. Consistent responses of “never” when asked about conflict indicate that they protect their friendship by actively avoiding disagreements. Relational harmony is something that must be actively worked on, allowing their friendship to remain a safe and positive space for both of them.
- Children demonstrate emotional attunement, referring to one’s ability to notice, understand, and respond sensitively to a friend’s feelings. They recognize others’ emotions and respond with understanding rather than judgment. The children not only perceive emotional cues but also act on them to maintain a supportive and positive relationship. They offer practical help to meet one’s needs through protecting and defending friends and assisting in tasks. Children demonstrate an ability to recognize social injustice and take action that preserves both the dignity of the individual and the integrity of the friendship. They do not remain passive when witnessing their friend in distress, but assume an active role in regulating peer behavior. Friendship is enacted through helping one another complete tasks, sharing answers, and offering encouragement during moments of difficulty.
- The current study’s findings revealed that there can still be friendships formed and maintained between Children with Level 1 Autism and their NND peers, without having the problem of misunderstanding the other person’s framework of empathy. A friendship that involves generosity, kindness, and support for each other illustrates an exchange of mutual care, not one of one-sided sacrifice.
- Happiness and kindness remain consistently underscored in the CWA – NND dyads, where friendship appears as a deeply emotional and relational experience. The constant focus on kindness implies that these children view friendship as a moral practice in addition to being a source of positive affect. It opposes deficit-oriented notions that distinctions in neurotype ultimately result in incompatible relational expectations. In this case, friendship is both defined and carried out through behaviors that demonstrate care, concern, and respect for the other. More precisely, kindness serves as a fundamental moral standard of friendship and is frequently recognized as the primary indication of intimacy. Further depicting how *pakikipagkapwa* operates as a lived moral requirement and reinforces interdependence through perceived relational connectedness are acts of compassion and concern for their friends’ safety and well-being.
- The present study challenges certain deficit-oriented presumptions that neurotype differences inevitably lead to conflicting relational expectations. These findings also contradict existing Western and NND-centered frameworks that mainly focus on verbal communication, emotional expressiveness, and reciprocity as the main metrics for a friendship. Present results suggest a convergence of values between CWA and NND children, particularly in their similarities in the value system of kindness and emotional safety, despite the fact that such frameworks frequently define cross-neurotype friendships as areas of mismatch or difficulty.
- The study provides several theoretical implications for developmental psychology and social psychology of Filipinos. First, the findings advance a culturally situated understanding of childhood friendship by

showing that CWA – NND relationships are not based nor are they explained by pure Western developmental models. Rather, these friendships function within a particular Filipino socio-moral framework based on the notion of *kapwa*. This means that *pakikiramdam* (emotional attunement), *pakikisama* (get along with), and childhood reciprocity and commitment are not merely individual competencies, but rather are culturally relational practices. Hence, the study contributes to developmental and socio-cultural theory by positing that peer relations, especially those with neurodivergent children, ought to be viewed as co-constructed, morally integrated, and ecologically scaffolded. Second, by giving prominence to indigenous relational constructs, the study proposes a theoretical expansion to include a collectivist moral framework along with culturally contextualized social regulation to be incorporated into the predominant theories of friendship, social inclusion, and social development.

- In this study is a highly contextualized discernment of the CWA – NND relationship and what it affirms in relation to the integration of learners with autism. It provides a substantiated account of these relational dynamics and highlights the strengths already present in CWA. Whereas previous literature has demonstrated the merits of peer-mediated interventions, such as the improvement of social initiation and responsiveness, the present study gives even more credence to its efficacy. As these practices become actualized in children's day-to-day interactions, the qualitative data exhibits the authentic and reciprocal relationships when opportunities are provided for the children.
- The findings of this study clearly support the implementation of Republic Act no. 7277 or the Magna Carta for Persons with Disabilities, as it promotes and aids in the integration of PWAs into society. Through this, they would have healthier mental health and well-being. In essence, the study fulfills the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 10 (Reducing Inequalities) and 3 (Good Health and Well-

Being). Beyond these domestic and global mandates, the study provides a pivotal contribution to the international repository of inclusive practices, such as the previously mentioned practices and interventions. This also serves as a strategic benchmark for developing nations striving to operationalize abstract human rights mandates by empirically documenting the mechanisms of meaningful inclusion through social acceptance. Through its emphasis on social connection and inclusion, the study contributes to the realization of a compassionate, high-trust society in which every individual, regardless of neurotype, can flourish and fully participate.

- The emphasis on social support in special education and therapy settings matches play-based and classroom-based therapeutic methods. Research shows that children with ASD interact with their peers more often and for longer periods when they are part of structured peer groups and adult-led social activities. As a result, Special Needs Education (SNED) teachers, shadow teachers, occupational therapists, and child psychologists may incorporate the teaching methods involving cooperative play, role-playing on emotions, and collaboration among peers in their teaching plans for students. What is most relevant here is that these methods are all part of the SNED model and the Department of Education's push for inclusive education that does not only place students in mainstream classrooms but actively involves them.

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