# Critical Friendship

## Helping Youth Lift as They Climb Together

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Friendship and peer groups are important to youth. However, adults in afterschool programs and other youth-serving community-based organizations often either ignore peer relationships or deem them detrimental to desired youth outcomes. What would it mean to consider young people's friendships in a different light? How can this important element of their experience support positive youth outcomes? One possibility is the cultivation of critical friendships.

The term *critical friendship* has been used in teacher professional learning communities for at least 20 years. Costa and Kallick (1993) define *critical friend* as "a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers a critique of a person's work as a friend" (p. 50). Critical friendship offers a new perspective on youth relationships. An exploration of how youth participants in a community-based organization developed their own critical friendships can push adults engaged in youth work to create conditions that support positive peer relationships.

## Friends and Peer Influence

With Sallee and Tierney (2007), I define *friendships* as informal peer groups or networks formed by young people themselves based on common interests or identity or on sustained interaction. Young people select friends based on common characteristics or on what the networks have to offer (Kiesner, Poulin, & Nicotra, 2003). They may choose a

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network, for example, to offset the impact of another network, affirm an identity, or gain access to resources (Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Sallee & Tierney, 2007; Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000).

Research on peer influence among youth casts peers in one of two contrasting roles. In one, peers are generally viewed as negative influences. For example, Dishion, McCord, and Poulin (1999) hypothesized that high-risk adolescents would escalate problem behavior when involved in interventions delivered in groups with other high-risk youth. Their longitudinal study appeared to prove their hypothesis: In some instances, aggregating high-risk youth reinforced problem behavior. Another study found that, over time, young people who were more susceptible to the influence of friends were also more apt to be pressured into risky behaviors and to experience depression (Allen, Porter, & McFarland, 2006). Fordham and Ogbu (1986), in their study of the role of peer networks in African-American students' school success, saw that peer relationships helped to create an oppositional cultural frame of reference that conflicted with academic achievement. A more recent study viewed peer groups as a means of socializing school misconduct, deviancy, and aggression (Ellis & Zarbatany, 2007).

The other role in which research casts peer relationships is a positive one. For example, in a study of high-achieving students, Hébert and Reis (1999) found that students' belief in themselves was reinforced by a network of high-achieving peers. Network members encouraged one another even through periods of academic underachievement, when support served as a buffer against failure. Horvat and Lewis (2003) found that the peer groups of high-achieving African-American female students were diverse; by developing supportive segments of their networks, the young women "managed" their academic success, affirming their academic pursuits and countering any negative influences of other network segments. Another study found that participation in supportive networks acted to balance against conflicting messages from the dominant structure and from other networks (Stanton-Salazar & Spina, 2000). Tighter networks can increase the likelihood of goal achievement (Sallee & Tierney, 2007). Darensbourg and Blake (2014) found that

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young people who participated in a peer network that provided academic support were more likely than others to view school as useful for their futures.

## Social Capital

The concept of social capital serves as a guide in discussing critical friendship. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988) present foundational work on social capital and its use. Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the sum total of actual or potential resources an individual can access as a result of being a member of a group. To develop social capital, Bourdieu says, an individual must build and maintain relationships embued with a sense of social obligation or presumed rights. Bourdieu considers social capital to be a tool for social reproduction in favor of the dominant class. This position, however, ignores the potential for other uses.

In contrast, Coleman (1988) defines social capital as a bridge between the idea that individual action can be driven by social norms, rules, and obligations and the idea that individual action is driven by independent benefit. Norms strengthen ties among members of a group and reinforce the belief that individuals in the group should work for the collective good. Individual members internalize group norms through rewards or sanctions by the group. The relations among group members create a sense of obligation, which serves as capital that individuals can access. Although he acknowledges that individuals can be linked in more than one context, Coleman views the family as the primary source of the social capital children need for future outcomes. This view presumes that young people do not have the ability to produce social capital of their own, thus placing them in a position of powerlessness. Though research demonstrates that youth must have access to institutional members who provide access to institutional information and resources (Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995), critical friendship presents the possibility that youth can themselves generate social capital.

## Methods and Analysis

My study of critical friendship took place in ACCESS (a pseudonym), a community-based youth organiza-

tion that serves over 400 middle school, high school, and college youth in a large city in the northeastern U.S. The population of students is approximately 70 percent African American and 30 percent Latino/a. Nearly 100 percent of ACCESS students graduate from high school, and almost 90 percent of those students graduate from college in six years or less.

At the time of my study, I was an ACCESS staff member working with middle school participants. Many high school students knew me either through their previous experience in the middle school program or through casual contacts during program time. Though my role as a staffer led to "inescapable influence" (Maxwell, 2005) on the research, my insider status also gave students a level of comfort in sharing freely with me and gave me a deep understanding of the context (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 1994). I was careful to monitor my level of subjectivity to avoid presenting an "authorized statement" of youth experiences (Peshkin, 1988).

The participant pool for this study cut across key ACCESS populations. It consisted of students who had joined ACCESS prior to the year of study and who had just completed their first year of high school or their first year of college. Based on consent and availability, 17 participants with varying lengths of ACCESS membership were selected: nine high school students and eight college students. The high school participants were predominantly female (56 percent) and Latino/a (44 percent); length of membership ranged from one to almost four years. The selected college participants were predominantly female (75 percent) and African American (75 percent). Pseudonyms were created for all study participants. In order to mitigate researcher bias, participants were given the opportunity to respond to and clarify their interview transcripts.

Data were collected using focus groups—two high school groups and one college group—and individual interviews. All focus groups included members who had joined ACCESS at various points during middle school. These varied points of entry allowed for exploration of variations in how students viewed and used their friend networks; it also protected against key informant bias (Maxwell, 2005).

Interview participants were chosen from focus groups based on their availability. I conducted 13 interviews, six with high school students and seven with college students. Interview questions asked about participants' connection to ACCESS, how they distinguished between close ACCESS friends and other ACCESS peers, and the degree to which they and their friends influenced

one another. Interviewees were also asked to draw a picture of their educational journey that indicated how their ACCESS friends helped or hindered their achievement.

Focus groups and interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed, using both inductive and deductive methods, to address three key research questions:

- How do peer networks developed in a community-based youth organization influence African-American and Latino/a students' goals of educational achievement?
- How are these networks formed?
- How do students understand the role played by these networks in their educational achievement?

Transcripts were analyzed using deductive methods to identify evidence of friends serving as buffers against failure (Hébert & Reis, 1999), providing affirmation of academic identity (Horvat & Lewis, 2003), or providing access to resources (Sallee & Tierney, 2007). Drawings were analyzed along with transcripts; together they enabled comparison of individuals' experience with the collective representation provided in focus group data. The data were examined a second time using inductive methods to identify trends related to how participants described friends, what their points of entry to ACCESS were, how they felt their ACCESS friends influenced their goals, and how they used their friend groups.

## Findings on ACCESS Critical Friendships

ACCESS friend groups were often formed within grades. Unsurprisingly, high school participants reported that they became friends with people with whom they had common interests or with whom they engaged consistently. For example, Lazar and Sam became friends after Lazar asked Sam for help in an ACCESS class they took together. For Benny and Sam, common interests were the catalyst. They discovered their shared love for music during an ACCESS trip. As Sam recalled in his interview, having other things in common besides their desire to achieve sustained their friendship: "We just went from hip-hop to our love of *capoeira*, and also paired with us liking school and actually wanting to succeed…. That's why we stay friends, even if during the summers I don't see him."

High school participants also talked about the importance of spending time together. For many, time created bonds they described as being more like family ties than friendships. Students who entered ACCESS later than others, however, could encounter challenges in forming friendships. Some expressed frustration with

the difficulty of entering friend groups that were already formed. However, the challenges were not insurmountable. Time was a factor, as Quinn explained: "It's like adding a new member to the family. They have to slowly catch up until [you] do things together with that new member. Then you feel more comfortable and allow them into the ACCESS family."

Although college participants talked more about personalities, they shared similar perspectives on how they formed ACCESS friendships. Jewel became friends with Keisha despite having perceived her personality as "aggressive" at first. After their families met at an ACCESS event, Jewel and Keisha participated in a sleepover that helped Jewel to see beyond her initial perception. She came to appreciate how Keisha's personality balanced out her own.

Jewel also echoed the challenges the high school students cited of making friends in her ACCESS cohort. When she joined in seventh grade, many of Jewel's ACCESS peers came from the same middle school and had joined ACCESS the year before. Jewel noted: "It was hard to work your way into the group."

Like the high school students, college participants also described their ACCESS friendships as "family." As they talked about their connections in the focus group, their playfulness, honesty, and lively debate provided evidence of the closeness of their relationships. Time was a major factor; the college focus group participants averaged six years of ACCESS membership. Their view of their ACCESS group as family was realistic, not idealized. India described how time built strong bonds that could survive through conflict and challenging dynamics: "I think because it's ACCESS people, because I grew up with them, because I love them to a certain extent, I'm always going to be around."

More explicitly than the high school group, college participants said that, in addition to time, shared goals shaped ACCESS friendships and distinguished them from other friendships. "We're all going for the same goals," Michelle explained. "We want to be successful. We want to have a degree. So we're very motivated, whereas some other friends, they're motivated—just for other things."

Strong relationships and shared goals created critical friendships among ACCESS participants. These critical friendships had three elements: sharing knowledge and information, affirming one another's academic identity, and establishing a system of accountability for their outcomes. Taken together, these aspects of the critical friendships point out the power of youth to create their own social capital.

### Sharing Knowledge and Information

High school focus group participants particularly emphasized how ACCESS friends studied together, shared information about program opportunities, and exchanged study tips and tricks. Fully half of the high school interviewees explicitly mentioned sharing knowledge or information. Quinn described how he would study for state exams with ACCESS friends and count on them to help reduce his test anxiety. Akilah recalled that an ACCESS friend shared how she organized her binder and suggested that Akilah put more recent notes in the front of her own binder so they would be easier to reference. Lisette had an ACCESS friend recommend a book to help her with a class in which she was having difficulty. These examples show how ACCESS friends shared knowledge to support one another's academic success.

This sharing was not limited to academic skills or content. Study participants also pointed ACCESS friends to more general resources that could help them achieve their goals. For example, Evelyn, a high school participant, shared that she looked to her ACCESS friends to make her aware of programs and opportunities that could support her desire to go to college. Her drawing of her educational journey showed a big circle labeled "ME" with "college" written in big letters above it. Smaller circles representing friends were connected to the ME circle with arrows going both ways. Evelyn explained:

> So...college is my goal, and that's me, and then my ACCESS friends, and we...share information about certain things.... I give them information; they give me information to help me go to college, or to help me do things that put me on the path to go to college.

Sam expressed a similar view: "I'm going to gain more than just knowledge. I'm going to gain resources, people who can help me later or I can end up helping....

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Having friends opens doors." Like Evelyn, Sam believed that his ACCESS friends offered information or resources that would help him reach his goals. He also saw the relationships as reciprocal, citing his ability to help his friends in return.

College participants discussed sharing information less often than did the high school students. Nevertheless, Pia shared a story about how she and her ACCESS friend Isaac shared resources while in college. In high school, Pia and Isaac were accepted by the same university. When Pia found out that Isaac did not plan to attend an event for accepted students, she made sure he would not miss out by inviting him to join her and her family. Then, after the school year began, Isaac reciprocated by finding course notes for Pia when illness forced her to miss class. "I didn't even have to ask him," Pia said. "He knew I wasn't in class, so he texted me and told me to meet him in the library. He found notes for both of us so that we had something to study from."

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### Affirmation of Academic Identity

Both high school and college focus group and interview participants cited the importance of mutual recognition of one another's academic identities. Being able to live out their intellectual selves with one another affirmed ACCESS friends' self-identification as students and offered refuge from other spaces and friend groups where their academic identities were not welcome.

Several high school participants in both focus groups talked about their inability to discuss school or education with their friends outside of ACCESS. For example, Benny, an avid skateboarder, explained that his skateboarding friends could not imagine him beyond his skater identity.

> When I talk about ACCESS, people are like, "You go to school, after school?" They thought I wasn't that kind of person. They think I'm a rebel, or a person that doesn't really care about school. I actually do, and they're like, "Explain to us what this program is again?"

Though Benny seemed to appreciate his connection with his skateboarding friends, he perceived that they were unable to negotiate who he was as both a skater and a scholar.

Evelyn similarly shared that she was unable to express her academic identity with school friends: "My friends really aren't interested in college, or beyond right now. They're, like, pass Algebra II, pass Spanish, pass Chemistry, that's it.... They don't really see beyond that." To Evelyn, her school friends' goals seemed shortsighted in comparison to the goals of her ACCESS friends, who, like her, wanted to get into and graduate from college.

College focus group and interview participants also appreciated the capacity of ACCESS friends to affirm their identities as academics and intellectuals. They experienced friendships in which they could talk about what they were learning as both comforting and enriching. Pia shared in the focus group that she could talk about school with ACCESS friends or relate school experiences to ACCESS experiences without conversations being "stiff." India and Isaac said that they valued intellectual exchanges with their ACCESS friends on a variety of issues. College participants also shared that they affirmed each other's academic identities in times of doubt. For example, Pia said that she could not complain about her grades with friends outside of ACCESS:

> I don't complain about my schoolwork with regular friends like I do with my ACCESS friends, because nobody understands why I'm complaining that I got a B instead of an A except for my ACCESS friends.... We know if you try hard, you expect something.

Being able to express these frustrations to ACCESS friends provided comfort for Pia, affirming her expectations for herself and strengthening her resolve. Lauren, another college participant, explained this element of critical friendship in this way:

> In high school, I felt like the smartest person in the world, and then I got to [college] and it's "Oh, snap!" I always have [ACCESS friends] there to be like, "Oh, Lauren, you're a brainiac," so I have people who know that side of me and can remind me of what I am.

ACCESS friends who, over time, developed a collective identity as intellectuals encouraged Lauren in moments of self-doubt and helped her renew her confidence in her abilities.

### System of Accountability

Another aspect of critical friendships that both high school and college study participants discussed was a system of accountability. Accountability was established both through the time participants spent together in ACCESS and through the culture created by structured ACCESS activities and programming. This system of accountability included established norms and expectations, goal setting and management, sources of motivation, and critical feedback.

### Established Norms and Expectations

The time ACCESS students spent sharing their goals and dreams helped to establish a set of norms and expectations. Sam, a high school participant, spoke of setting and managing his goals because his ACCESS friends had shared their own goals and dreams:

> Having them always telling you about what they want to do, you really start thinking.... It just makes you think they're starting to get their stuff together, so you have to follow suit, which forces you to think differently so you keep up.

College participants, in referring to ACCESS friends as "family" during their focus group and interviews, evoked a strong sense of mutual obligation accompanied by norms and expectations that governed their interactions. Having known one another since middle school, several college participants talked about how they expected to interact with ACCESS friends and what would happen when those expectations were not met. For example, Mike tied his expectations for his ACCESS friends to his recognition of those friends as family. "Because it's family, I hold them to a certain standard.... I know we all have the same vision of success, so certain things I just would not like to hear when it comes to family." He went on to say, "I realize that [this attitude has] worked against me sometimes." Mike recognized that sometimes ACCESS friends were annoyed by his expectations though they might generally appreciate the importance of shared norms.

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### Goal Setting and Management

High school participants talked about how sharing goals created an implicit expectation of achievement, thereby igniting a process of evaluating the expectations they set for themselves. This process encouraged them to consider multiple pathways for achievement in case they encountered roadblocks. Sam, for example, said that he realized that choosing college as a goal wasn't enough; he had to develop a specific plan for achieving his goal. Sam's case illustrates how sharing goals made participants want to refine their goals in order to align themselves with their ACCESS friends.

College participants echoed Sam's sentiments. When asked how ACCESS friends affected her thinking about her educational goals, Pia answered right away, "I definitely think it raised the bar.... I think, are my goals as high as they should be? Am I aiming too low?" She went on to share that, when she expressed doubt about pursuing educational opportunities, her ACCESS friends would encourage her to take the risk. Regular conversations with them about the future seemed to inspire Pia to reflect on her goals and standards and, when she felt unsure, to aim higher.

### Sources of Motivation

Study participants cited ACCESS events, as well as relationships, as sources of motivation. Events that pushed participants outside their comfort zones reinforced their commitment to their goals by providing evidence of their capabilities. For example, student leadership retreats featured team-building activities that both challenged participants and strengthened their relationships. Quinn, a high school participant, considered the effect of such shared experiences: "[If] I feel like quitting or take it down a notch and not challenge myself, I'll have somebody from ACCESS who would be like, 'Come on, remember when we did this and that, and you're going to quit now?'" Having experienced shared challenges, participants knew not only their own capabilities but also those of their friends. Quinn believed that ACCESS friends armed with such knowledge would not allow one another to attempt anything less than what they were capable of achieving. Similarly, India, a college participant, said:

It's good to have somebody around that's always going to expect greatness from you and know what you're capable of, and they're kind of pushing you.... ACCESS put us in so many situations where we had to show our greatness.... We each know what everybody's talents are.... They push you toward what they know you're good at, what they know you enjoy, because they've been able to see it better than anybody.

Knowledge of one another's talents and abilities served as a source of motivation for ACCESS friends. This part of the accountability system depended both on the time ACCESS friends spent together and on the program opportunities ACCESS provided.

### Critical Feedback

Another element of the system of accountability is critical feedback. Critical feedback includes asking thought-provoking questions, giving honest but constructive feedback, and calling members to task when group norms and expectations are not being met. An exchange during the college focus group perfectly illustrates how ACCESS friends held one another accountable. Isaac starts off by comparing his relationship with his ACCESS friend Mike to other relationships:

> Isaac: Whenever I deal with Mike it's always something positive, it's always something progressive, it's always something uplifting. Whenever I hang out with him, it's never something, like, "Oh, let's go get drunk." It's never something like, "Let's go run to town and be vandals," you know? [Group laughs]
>
> Pia: What is that? Who you dealing with? [Laughing] Mike, you better get him!
>
> Isaac: But I have friends that I do that with.
>
> India: That's not what your ACCESS friends let you do!

Though they did it in a lighthearted way, the focus group participants called Isaac to task for choices that would run counter to his success. They referred to their shared norms and made it clear that they held Isaac not to his other friends' standards but to ACCESS standards.

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College participant Zara represented elements of critical feedback in her drawing of the role her ACCESS friends played in her journey to college graduation. Zara explained that the emoji-like image she drew with an exclamation point next to it was the "punch in the face" ACCESS friends would deliver to motivate her to get back on track should she fall off course. Zara's analogy of a punch in the face makes it clear that she did not expect this wake-up call to be soothing. Critical feedback includes giving and receiving honest responses to critical friends' choices, especially when those choices stray from intended goals.

Similarly, critical feedback in the ACCESS system of accountability supported India in her college application. In her interview, India admitted to having procrastinated in applying to her first-choice college for fear being rejected. As the application deadline drew near, her ACCESS friends discovered she had not yet applied and questioned her until she submitted the application. They refused to allow her to set her sights on lesser goals. In the end, India was accepted and spent her first year at her first-choice college.

### What Can Organizations Do?

The critical friendships of ACCESS youth in this study highlight the power of youth to create their own social capital. Providing one another with access to resources, sharing their academic identities, and enforcing their multifaceted system of accountability gave ACCESS participants a kind of power or agency they could not generally experience in other spaces. Young people in programs like ACCESS who develop their own critical friendships can ultimately use their power to circumvent existing power structures that often bar access to resources they need to realize their goals.

Although this study represents a small sample of participants in one urban youth program, it nonetheless provides lessons to youth-serving organizations. When seen through the lens of critical friendships, peer relationships represent an underutilized resource for youth-serving programs. Organizations can consider four tips to promote the development of critical friendships.

### Make Time

Study participants overwhelmingly discussed the role time played in the development of their critical friendships. Both high school and college respondents talked about how important it was to have spent extended periods of time together to develop their friendships. To meet this need, youth-serving organizations can create programs that encourage long-term participation, which may be as important as drop-in services that meet specific needs. Long-term participation creates the opportunity for consistent exposure to and interaction with peers, which, in turn, is a vital element in the formation of critical friendships.

### Make Memories

In addition to time, critical friendships also need to build on common experiences. Youth-serving organizations can offer shared experiences that both challenge participants and enable them to display their strengths. Study participants described ACCESS retreats as an example. Program activities that are less intense but more frequent could serve the same purpose. Activities that build critical friendships enable participants to gain insight into themselves and their peers and to make connections with those peers.

### Make Space

Participants in youth-serving programs often live multi-networked lives. Their networks are sources of agency and power that adult leaders seldom take into account. ACCESS participants willingly shared information, resources, and skills to support one another in reaching their shared goals. They were explicitly conscious of this knowledge sharing as a benefit of their ACCESS relationships. Programs and organizations can empower youth agency by providing time and opportunity for participants to share their knowledge and resources. One option is short, structured activities similar to speed networking panels. Another is simply providing informal spaces where young people can gather to converse.

### Set the Tone

In talking in his interview about how his ACCESS friends affirmed his academic identity, Quinn acknowledged the influence of ACCESS: "Not just because ACCESS is an educational environment, and that's the energy that we have to accept, but I just feel like I can talk to ACCESS friends and it won't be a problem." The energy transmitted by the organization helped to support ACCESS participants' academic identities and aspirations.

Youth-serving organizations transmit clear messages to participants through their physical space, their programs, and especially the interactions they encourage. The ways in which staff work with youth participants and adult colleagues can create a culture that supports the development of critical friendships. Youth workers must engage program participants in a way that assumes they have strengths, talents, knowledge, information, and resources that are valuable and worth sharing. The ways in which staff engage young people set an example for how young people should engage one another. Adult facilitators' care and concern for all participants serves as a model for participants' care and concern for each other. Adults can also demonstrate accountability. Programs can explicitly set expectations for interactions through participant orientations, physical reminders in the space, and staff-participant interactions. Modeling respectful and caring interactions will inform the norms and obligations that participants develop as they build critical friendships.

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