Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences:

Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to Karra. I hope that you always follow your dreams with the same enthusiasm and belief that you have shown throughout my journey.

Love, Mom

ABSTRACT

In research exploring adolescent friendship, relatively little study has focused on Black youths' friendship patterns or, more specifically, the role that these relationships have in their every day experiences as students within their respective school environments. Understanding the interpersonal peer attachments of Black youth, as they exist within their daily school lives, provides valuable insight into the role that such relationships may play in, among other areas, the social competencies and academic performance of Black learners.

The present exploratory study obtained the perspectives of African Nova Scotian adolescents related to the role that friendships play in their daily school experiences by utilizing qualitative methodology and approaches. Focus groups (one with males, one with females, and one mixed gender) and three individual interviews were held with adolescent Black learners, accessed through the Black Educators Association (BEA), an organization committed to the equitable education of Black learners and a major resource to students, parents, educators, and other members of the community. All interviewed students were enrolled at various area junior high schools (grades 7- 9) within the Halifax Regional Municipality, Nova Scotia, Canada.

Transcribed interviews (data) from these discussion sessions were systematically analysed employing discovery-based, cross-comparative data analysis commonly associated with grounded theory methodology. Results of the analysis were organized by four major descriptive categories namely, *Friendship Formation and Development, Friendship Quality and Function, Friendship Maintenance, and Friendship Enhancement/Support.*

Findings of the research provided enhanced understanding of the nature and meaning of friendship relationships within the school experiences of adolescent Black learners and provided for recommendations to support the development, maintenance, and enhancement of such critical relational attachments.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

African Nova Scotians, both historically and to the present day, have encountered numerous challenges in their pursuit of education at all levels of the public and post-secondary school systems. A little over a decade ago, the extensive Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) Report (1994) provided valuable research into the systemic racism and inequities experienced by Black learners in Nova Scotia, Canada. The report also heightened awareness, dialogue, and eventual action in the establishment (1996) of the African-Canadian Services Division (ACSD) of the provincial Department of Education. The development of ACSD marked a progressive effort to address the educational barriers and promote the academic success of Black learners. The BLAC Report (1994) provided the Black community (i.e., educators, parents, youth) with an opportunity to have their voices heard concerning issues such as racism, low teacher expectations, curriculum deficiencies, community issues, and parent and student supports. Less addressed in the earlier report (and other discussions of the educational experiences of African Nova Scotian youth), however, is the role that interpersonal relationships, and friendships in particular, play in the overall school experiences (e.g., psychosocial adjustment, school achievement, and school satisfaction) of Black Nova Scotian learners.

The development of social competency and academic success has long been associated with school-based peer relationships (Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003). Such relationships can have a notable affect on achievement and functioning in school and, in turn, experiences at school can affect the quality of these relationships (Gifford-Smith et

al., 2003). Dubois and Hirsch (1990) suggest that minority children's friendship patterns may differ in significant ways from those of White children and warrant further understanding. The authors specifically express the need for more research concerning the peer ties of Black adolescents (Dubois et al., 1990). Using qualitative methods, Codjoe (2001) explored the schooling experiences of Black Canadians, and Freeman (1999) examined the high school experiences of Black youth who attend predominately White schools. Obtaining the youth perspective, is important to adolescent research (Rich and Ginsburg, 1999). The current study sought the youth perspective by means of group and individual interviews. By engaging in such conversations, the researcher hoped to explore the meanings that African Nova Scotian youth make of their friendships and how such interpersonal relationships might influence their educational experiences. Improved knowledge of the influence of friendships upon Black youth in school would be a valuable contribution to understanding the diverse educational experiences of African Nova Scotian youth and developing programming initiatives responsive to the expressed needs of these youth.

Purpose and Aim

The purpose of the present study was to discover and explore the perceived role and influence that intraracial and interracial friendships have on the social adjustment/ functioning and academic success of African Nova Scotian youth. The research aimed to gather the perspectives of Black Nova Scotian learners in order to gain insight into their psychological, emotional, and social needs and to better understand the associated risk and resiliency factors that such close relationships might have on the Black learner. It was hoped that the knowledge gained from this exploratory study would serve to enhance current research directed toward improving the quality of educational success and the broader educational experience of African Nova Scotian youth.

Research Questions

1. How do Black youth conceptualize the role and meaning of friendship in their everyday lives?

2. How do Black youth conceptualize the role or influence of friendship in their educational experiences?

3. From the perspective of Black youth, what factors related to friendship affect their experience of social competency (e.g., adjustment, satisfaction) and personal identity within their everyday school experiences?

4. Which, if any, significant figures (e.g., teachers, parents, coaches, clergy) do Black youth regard as key influences on their everyday friendships in the school and community?

5. What supports, resources, or educational practices would Black youth view as useful to themselves in terms of developing and maintaining supportive friendships in their school communities?

Definition of Terms

The following definitions have been employed for purposes of this research:

African Nova Scotian:	A Black individual who is a resident of Nova Scotia. Certain members of this population also identify themselves by the terms 'Black Nova Scotian' or 'Black'. This term includes a bi-racial youth who has an African Nova Scotian parent.
Educational Experience:	The daily and overall association of youth with their schooling. Companion term: School Experience.
Friendships:	Voluntary, intimate, dynamic relationships founded on cooperation and trust (Gifford-Smith et al., 2003).
Youth:	A person between the ages of 12 to 16, inclusive (Also: 'Adolescent', 'Middle school-aged', 'Junior high school-aged').

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Children's Friendships

Values and benefits

Friendships of children and adolescents have been widely explored during the last century (Berndt, 1996; Bukowski, Newcomb, & Hartup, 1996), within such diverse, yet complimentary, fields as anthropology, counselling and communications, child psychology, education, and sociology. More recently, literature has developed that increasingly distinguishes more general peer relations from close and intimate friendships, suggesting that friendships may have a distinct influence on children's socioemotional development (Hartup, 1996b), self-esteem, and achievement and functioning in school (Gifford-Smith et al., 2003; Hartup & Laursen, 1999; Zajac & Hartup, 1997). Buhrmester and Furman (1986) additionally emphasize that friendships provide opportunities which support the development of social competency (perspective taking, empathy, and altruism) in children, while Newcomb and Bagwell (1996) posit that "friendship provides a unique context for development, for what is gained in a friendship relation cannot be as effectively achieved in any other relationship" (p. 290).

Friendship selection

Research identifies that children often select peers with whom to develop friendships based upon similarity, proximity, status, and an early sense of fairness and reciprocity (Clark, 1989; Epstein, 1983b; Hallinan & Teixeira, 1987; Hallinan & Williams, 1989; Hartup & Stevens, 1997; Tuma, & Hallinan, 1979; Quillian & Campbell,

2003). Hartup et al. (1999) and Hartup (1996a) further outline that childhood friends typically display similar behaviour, positive social interaction, and are able to resolve conflicts in a manner that maintains their relationship. The more similar youth are in race, gender, age (Hallinan et al., 1987), activity preferences, and socioeconomic and school status (Aboud & Mendelson, 1996), the more likely they are to form a friendship (Hallinan et al., 1987).

Developmental functions

The contribution that friendship makes to an individual's development differs over the life course (Hartup et al., 1997; Van Lieshout, Cillessen, & Haselager, 1999) yet is recognized as particularly critical during middle childhood and adolescence (Buhrmester et al., 1986). Hartup et al. (1997) and Buhrmester (1996) stress the role that friends play with respect to acquiring essential pro-social skills, such as compromising, turn-taking, and empathy. Newcomb, Bukowski, and Bagwell (1999), and Hartup (1996a) suggest that friendships are not all alike, differing qualitatively in terms of the type of behaviour that is engaged in, how conflicts are resolved (negotiation versus power assertion), the amount of time spent together, the social power between friends, and the level of mutual support. Accordingly, friendships may serve as either "protective" or "risk" factors during a child's or youth's development (Hartup et al., 1997). As a positive function, friends may provide for the healthy socio-emotional and cognitive development of children and youths (Hartup, 1989; Newcomb et al., 1999: Van Lieshout et al., 1999). To that end, it has been suggested that a lack of friends may result in loneliness, depression, and psychological maladjustment (Clark & Ayers, 1992).

Buhrmester (1996) outlines, that the types of social interactions within friendships that support psycho-emotional well-being include positive regard, loving affection, entertaining interaction, and assistance in coping with stress. Aboud et al. (1996) similarly emphasize that friends may positively contribute to one another's psycho-emotional well being through companionship, emotional support, and self-validation. Additionally, according to Buhrmester et al. (1986), friends contribute to each other's positive social development and adjustment by: (a) the fulfillment of interpersonal needs, (b) the socialization of interpersonal competence, and (c) the provision of natural therapeutic experiences (p. 41). Buhrmester et al. (1986) mention that competition between friends that involves the disadvantage or demeaning of one or more of the individuals in the relationship, and friendships in which one or more of the individuals is overly dependent or treated unequally, as examples of negative relationships, unsupportive of the positive development and well-being of all members. Giordano (2003) mentions additional negative elements of friendship to include conflict, disagreement, and change.

Adolescents' Friendships

Intimate relationships

As children transition toward adolescence, their friendships tend to broaden beyond activity-based relationships to the development of intimate relationships (Buhrmester, 1990; Fuhrmann, 1990). Accordingly, adolescents are more likely to differentiate between the closeness and supportive interactions of their friends versus

their acquaintances (Berndt & Perry, 1986; Buhrmester, 1990). In this context, Aboud et al. (1996), Coates (1987), and Newcomb et al. (1999) suggest that emotional support and autonomy become increasingly essential qualities of friendships during adolescence. This view is also supported by Buhrmester (1996) and Van Lieshout et al. (1999) who note that the reliance on friends as confidants, sources of intimacy, and support increases as adolescents rely less on their parents to meet these needs.

Friendship patterns

Adolescent friendships may be found in both same or mixed gender groupings (Fuhrmann, 1990; Karweit & Hansell, 1983b), however, Berndt and Hoyle (1985) and, later, Newcomb et al. (1999) suggest that youth are influenced differently by dyadic friendships, in which thoughts and feelings are often shared more intimately than by larger friendship networks. Interestingly, adolescent females have been noted to reduce their circle of friends by deferring to develop new friendships or by eliminating older, less active friendships as they undertake to deepen more bonded and intimate same gender relationships (Berndt et al., 1985).

Gender

Clark et al. (1992) mention that, "there is strong evidence to suggest that the friendships of boys and girls differ" (p. 394). One such difference is the cross-race friendships of African American females and males, with females engaging in more cross-race friendships than do African American males (Clark et al., 1992). Another difference, as reported by Johnson (2004), is the higher level of emotional closeness

reported by adolescent females as compared to the self-reports of males. Henrich, Kuperminc, Sack, Blatt, & Leadbeater (2000) also report gender differences concerning friendships patterns of males and females. Henrich et al. (2000) suggest, that although friendships may be of equal importance to males and females, they may differ in that girls' friends tend to contribute to social competence, academic, and behavioural adjustment whereas males' friends contribute to personal competence and a lesser extent to emotional support. It has also been suggested by Giordano (2003), that females are less likely to associate with delinquent friends.

Romantic relationships

Friendship patterns of adolescents are recognized to change as youth mature and become more interested in dating (Fuhrmann, 1990). Research has also indicated that having same-gender friends during preadolescence, as these serve to increase personal self-esteem and social competency, might provide a desirable foundation for later romantic relationships during adolescence (Hartup et al., 1997). Laursen (1996) mentions, that adolescent friendships and romantic relationships are similar in that they both contain intimacy, companionship, and commitment. The dating relationship, however, may at times cause conflict with other key friendships, given the increased time devoted to the romantic relationship (Furman, 1999).

Black Youth, Friendships, and School

Black youths' friendship patterns

Giordano (2003) suggests that there has been "surprisingly little" research on the everyday friendship patterns of minority youth (p. 262). Most of the research on adolescent friendships has drawn from samples of White youth and may not be accurate or relevant to the friendship patterns of Black adolescents (Dubois et al., 1990; Giordano, Cernkovich, & DeMaris, 1993). Giordano et al., (1993) highlight a need not only for additional cross race studies, but also for research that examines same race adolescent friendships, in order to have a comprehensive understanding of the role such peers play in the everyday lives of Black youth. Studies that do focus on the friendship patterns of Black adolescents have commonly focused on the "compensation argument", which holds that "Black youth are believed to be even more peer oriented than their White counterparts because of (presumed) family deficits" (p. 277). Giordano et al. (1993) did not find support for the compensation argument in their study. In contrast, they found that Black youth may not seek the similar degree of autonomy from the family and as such, their peer relations may not have the impact that is typically associated with adolescent friendships (Clark, 1989; Giordano et al., 1993).

Dubois et al. (1990) suggest that both school and nonschool settings are important to the friendship patterns of Black youth. More specifically, they report the following findings in regard to Black youths' friendship patterns: Black youth tend to have a significantly higher number of neighbourhood friends in comparison to White youth, more than eighty percent have an other-race school friend, more than fifty percent report

having a close relationship with an other-race school friend, and twenty-five percent report seeing the other-race school friend outside of school (p. 533). Moreover, Hallinan et al. (1987), point out opposing arguments concerning the impact that racial composition of the classroom might have on the friendship patterns of Black youth. It has been suggested that Black youth will make more friends with White students when they are in the minority (Hallinan et al., 1987; Quillian et al., 2003). In contrast, however, is the suggestion that Black youth will only choose friends from their own race in situations in which they are the minority (Hallinan et al., 1987).

Friendships and school behaviour

Given such fundamental features of friendship attraction and development as similarity, reciprocity, and proximity (Clark, 1989); the school setting has been noted as highly conducive to the development of social relationships and friendships among children and youth (Douvan, 1983). Quillian et al. (2003) remark that literature has long supported that friendship provides a means of sharing, coping with stress, and finding acceptance from peers in school. Berndt and Keefe (1995) report that adolescents' adjustment to school is influenced by the characteristics and quality of their friendships, even more so when factors of similar behaviour (Berndt, 1996; Van Lieshout et al., 1999), and academic achievement (Berndt et al., 1995), are considered. The influence of friends on adolescents' negative, rather than positive, behaviour in school appears to be stronger (Berndt et al., 1995; Hartup et al., 1997). It has been suggested that interaction between friends whose friendships possess negative features tend to engage in more

negative behaviour with each other, their classmates, and their teacher (Berndt, 2002),

and to be more disruptive and less involved in school (Berndt et al., 1995).

Friendships, race, and school

Schools often reflect the racial relations (Quillian et al., 2003) and social status

(Clark, 1989) in society. The literature has revealed that desegregation in schools does

not necessarily result in an increase of interracial friendships (Hallinan et al., 1987;

Hallinan et al., 1989; Hansell & Slavin, 1981; Miller, 1983; Schofield, 1981; Tatum,

1997). Clark (1991) emphasizes that the academic achievement of African-American

adolescents depends as much on the social environment of the school as it does upon

their academic ability, motivation, or personal and social identity. Karweit et al. (1983a)

state that, "access to highly motivated, talented, or able sets of students is important for

the socialization of desirable values and aspirations" (p. 29). Research has shown that

collaboration on school assignments between supportive friends facilitates better problem

solving and communication, which might contribute to cognitive growth (Hartup, 1996b;

Zajac et al., 1997). Furthermore, it has been suggested, that adolescents who have more

positive best friend relationships appear to perform better in school (Berndt et al., 1995).

The transition from elementary school to junior high can be particularly

challenging for Black youth in such school environments (Dubois et al., 1990),

especially, according to Clark (1989), for Black adolescent females, due to difficulties

experienced in forming same gender friendships with White students. Quillian et al.

(2003), report that race is an important similarity criterion during early and later

adolescence. Clark (1989), however, notes that Black youth are limited in the selection

of same-race friends when attending predominately White schools. Since Black youth are more limited in their use of race as a basis of similarity in their school friendship selections, they must often look either to establish other sources of commonality with prospective school friends, settle with having fewer friends at school, or primarily maintain friendships with same-race peers in their neighbourhoods (Clark, 1989; Dubois et al., 1990).

DuBois et al. (1990) emphasize that interracial friendship is rare during adolescence because of the separation and conflict between Black and White peer groups. In keeping, Hallinan et al., (1987) note that the perception of youth concerning the likelihood of the other person to reciprocate their desire to form a friendship is important to the formation of interracial friendships. So, too, is the degree of friendliness and popularity that the person has among their same race peers (Hallinan et al., 1987). According to Hallinan (1982) and Hallinan et al. (1987), Black students appeared to be friendlier than their White peers were, as revealed by the surveyed friendship choices of Black and White students in desegregated classrooms. Nevertheless, Hallinan et al. (1987) found that Black youth tended to segregate themselves and were more likely than their White peers to make and maintain intraracial friendship choices over the duration of the school year. Furthermore, Bowman Damico, Bell-Nathaniel, & Green, (1981), found that although Black students perceived their White peers to be friendly, White students did not share a similar perception of their Black peers in regard to level of friendliness. Hallinan (1982, 1989) suggests that initiatives aimed at increasing White students' recognition of the Black youths' friendliness toward them might do much to promote the development of interracial friendships.

Black learner research and educational issues

While considerable literature has developed from Black educators and members of the Black community regarding the educational experiences of Black learners (Alladin, 1996; BLAC, 1994; Codjoe, 2001; Dei, 1996), Codjoe (2001) outlines that it has not been a priority otherwise within Canadian educational research. As the BLAC (Black Learners Advisory Committee), report (1994) comments that, "until the formation of the BLAC, no organization has had a mandate to research and pull together comprehensive information on issues affecting the Black learner in Nova Scotia" (vol.2, p.178). Among these issues was the educational segregation of Black and White students in Halifax, 1876, based on concerns of White parents who did not want their children to attend school with Black children, supported by a law established in 1865, which legally sanctioned discrimination in education (BLAC, vol.2, 1994).

According to the BLAC report, while desegregation of schools occurred in the United States in 1954, Nova Scotia did not desegregate all of their schools until the 1960's (BLAC, 1994). The delay of ending this legalized discrimination in the education system only served to extend Black students' experiences in Nova Scotia of being bussed into White schools, suffering racial stereotyping, racial name-calling, tensions between Black and White students, streamlining, and low expectations from teachers, many of which experiences, except for forced bussing, persist to the present day (Dei, 1996). As James and Brathwaite (1996) point out, however, some of these issues are not exclusive to Black learners in Nova Scotia (streaming of Black students has also been found to occur in schools within the province of Ontario).

Black learners' sense of school inclusion

Alladin (1996) mentions that racial minorities in Canadian schools, particularly Black and Aboriginal students, deal with issues of alienation and marginalization. James et al. (1996) report the belief held by many African Canadian youth that the public education system largely does not recognize or respond supportively to their racial identities or related academic and social needs. In a study conducted by Dei (1996), group interviews with Black youth from a Canadian inner city revealed that prejudice, sexism, and discrimination might contribute to Black youth becoming disengaged from school. James et al. (1996) suggest that the school system itself, and not the lack of either academic motivation or parental support, might significantly contribute to Black students' general underachievement and disengagement from school. As reported by Way and Pahl (2001), "students who perceive the school environment as respectful, supportive, and trusting may find it easier to make and maintain supportive friendships with their peers than those who perceive the school to be a hostile environment" (p. 329).

Goodenow and Grady's (1993) research into urban White, Black, and Hispanic adolescents' sense of school belonging in relation to academic motivation proposed that experiences of support in school, including friends, are essential to students' feelings of inclusion and commitment to their education. In this regard, Clark (1989) states that, "minority adolescents may experience more imbalances in school settings than majority adolescents" (p. 178). According to Clark (1991), "friends have an impact on African-American adolescents' feelings of academic competence and their attitude toward school" (p. 47). School friendships are also regarded as valued and specific supports for coping with peer rejection abuse and other forms of victimization (Hodges, Boivin,

Bukowski, & Vitaro, 1999), especially if the school environment or administration does not provide adequate social support (Clark 1991). In addition, it has been suggested that the stereotype of White students as being academically superior to their Black peers, might not only serve as a source of discouragement for Black learners, but may also promote underachievement on the part of certain Black youth, in order to retain inclusion in Black peer groups or contribute to their decision to assimilate with their White friends' values and identities (Tatum, 1997).

Social supports

Coates (1987) emphasized the importance of adolescents having social supports available is to alleviate stress, facilitate problem solving, and contribute to social competency, and noted that this is especially important for Black youth who deal with social inequality, both within their school experiences and daily lives. Coates' research notes that different socialization experiences of Black and White American youth are a result of social, family, and cultural encounters with racism that might contribute to adolescents' different perceptions of social support from different racial groups.

As an example of a positive interracial educational environment providing mutual support to its students, Datnow and Cooper (1997) cite the formal and informal peer networks of African American youth in predominately White independent prep schools. In these schools, all students tended to encourage academic success, and Black peers, who otherwise might refer to one another as 'acting white' in order to succeed socially, were supportive of their shared racial identity, thereby contributing positively to the academic and social experiences of the Black youth. Notwithstanding, Tatum (1997)

wonders if a Black youth can receive sufficient emotional support from a White friend when dealing with issues of race and identity since, they are without comparable experiences to draw upon either in school or everyday living.

Cultural representation and identity in school

Clark (1989) mentions that cultural factors such as family structure and socialization patterns might determine the degree of influence that peers have on the adolescent. Clark (1989) suggests that cultural and racial affiliations and experiences play a significant role in the social development of adolescents, including their formation of friendships. When compared with self-reports of White and Hispanic youth, however, Black youth rated their family as being a good source of support (Clark, 1989). The authors particularly emphasize the importance of considering race and ethnicity in both social networks and adolescent development as it relates to academic performance and school behaviour. Irvine (1990) emphasizes the following concerning the importance of understanding the role that culture plays in Black children's school experience:

> Because the culture of Black children is different and often
> misunderstood, ignored, or discounted, Black students are likely to
> experience cultural discontinuity in schools, particularly schools in which
> the majority, or Eurocentric persons, control, administer, and teach (p.
> xix).

Schofield's (1981) research of peer relations at the junior high school level reports, "Most teachers do little or nothing to cultivate positive views of Black and White identity in their students or to guide students as they begin to try to discover how to interact with outgroup members" (p. 73). There has been a limited presentation of achievements of Black individuals in educational curriculum, and there are considerably

fewer Black educators and role models for Black youth to emulate (Dei, 1996). Dei (1996) also mentions the role that culture plays in Black youths' engagement in school, psychological, and overall well-being and emphasized that Black Canadian youth may experience alienation from school and connectedness with their school in part because of the lack of cultural representation in school.

Much of the qualitative literature concerning peers and academic success among Black students refers to the earlier mentioned notion of "acting White", as a descriptor that Black peers might give to other Black students striving to do well in school (Bergin & Cooks, 2002; Ford & Harris, 1996; Fordham, 1988; Horvat & Lewis, 2003; Kester, 1994; Schofield, 1981). Kester (1994) notes the conflict this label may cause Black youth who, "recognize the fine line they must walk between peer acceptance and school success" (p. 69). As Kester reports, many students consider classroom success to be based on acceptance by their peers rather than assessed by their grades, although at the same time, students also suggest that they do better in school when having accepting and understanding friends.

Dei (1996) found that the issue of self and group cultural identity within the school and the discrimination from peers might also have an impact. An example of this from Dei's (1996) study points out the experiences of a gifted female student whose best friend is Filipino and had expressed concern of being perceived by her Black friends as not being "Black" enough (p. 53). Another student experienced being called an "Oreo", which is described as being Black on the outside, but White on the inside (Dei, 1996, p. 53).

African Canadian youths' voices

Dei's (1996) study emphasizes the importance of Black youths' voices in

obtaining their perspectives of their school experience when he states the following:

> The narratives of Black/African Canadian youth show how the dynamics
> of social difference shape and implicate the processes and experiences of
> public schooling. On both analytical and practical levels, students'
> accounts bring to the fore the dilemma of searching for an appropriate
> centrality of the experiences, histories, and cultures of the diverse student
> body in curriculum and classroom pedagogical practices, to facilitate
> youth learning (p. 57).

Moreover, Dei (1996) states that, "students' accounts reveal an understanding of the

structural and material constraints that both inhibit and facilitate their school progress and

eventual 'success'" (p. 57).

African Nova Scotian youth

The Halifax Regional School Board's (2003) research pilot project, which

presents the perspectives of African Nova Scotian youth concerning their school

experiences reveals, that although the interviewed youths' friends are comprised of

students from various cultures, they have the following perception, "some White students

and teachers were intimidated by their numbers when they were in large groups at

school" (p. 20). In addition, the youth also expressed that they felt more comfortable

being around other African Nova Scotian students (HRSB, 2003). Fear of being seen as

"White", was cited by Black high school students, who as a result, tend to avoid

involvement in extra-curricular activities or select certain courses because of such forms

of peer pressure (HRSB, 2003). Notwithstanding, Smith (2000) found that Black

Canadian students (sample of Black youth from Halifax and Toronto) do value

education and are generally positive about school and their future success.

Discussions, as reported in BLAC (1994), with Black students who attend school

in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), highlight negative experiences that some of

these youth encounter with their peers at school:

- Feelings of isolation when they are the only Black student in the class (p. 26).

- Discrimination experienced by light skinned Black youth from both their White and

  Black peers (p. 56),

- Negative peer pressure (encouraged to skip class, smoke, drink alcohol),

- Participation in fights to support their friends,

- Discouragement from academic activities and student clubs, and accusations of

  "acting White" for youths who are interested in completing their education,

- Ridicule for speaking standard English and having White friends,

- Isolation for the Black youth who do not comply with these attitudes and behaviours

  (BLAC, 1994, vol.3, p. 59).

The negative psychological, emotional, and social experiences encountered by

some Black youth within the school setting, speaks to the compelling need for a better

understanding of the role that close interpersonal relationships, such as friendships, play

in the daily school experiences of these Black learners. In order to gain insight and

enhance such understanding, this study aimed to hear and gather the perspectives of

adolescent Black learners, regarding the meaning and value of friendships in their regular

school experiences, through shared focus group discussions and individual interviews.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY AND SAMPLE

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is useful in the discovery of how such factors as human experience, peer influence, culture, or belief, interact to form individual perspectives and guide their behaviours (Rich et al., 1999). Typically undertaken through the gathering of data from "ordinary conversation and everyday language" (Maracek, 2003, p. 59), qualitative research employs naturalistic inquiry methods within such formats as individual interviews, focus groups, and observational settings and situations (Rich et al., 1999). Taylor and Bogdan (1984) note, that qualitative research provides the researcher with the opportunity to gain the perspectives of the participants from a holistic and humanistic viewpoint. As Rich et al. (1999) set forth, "qualitative researchers seek to understand their subjects from the inside out" (p. 372). Insight into the participants' lived experiences, inner and personal viewpoints may be applied, in turn, to the research questions (Taylor et al., 1984), while accounting for the researcher's beliefs, perspectives, and predispositions, as they may bear upon the conduct, analysis, and interpretation of the research.

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) describe qualitative research as involving the following characteristics: the utilization of the natural setting as the source of data, emphasis on process over outcome, inductive (open) analysis of data, and focus on participants' perspectives. This approach allows the researcher to modify concepts as the collection and analysis of data proceeds, and is conducive to the exploration of meanings that participants attribute to personal and social situations (Burgess, 1985).

Way et al. (2001) suggest that qualitative methods are useful in exploring the meanings that adolescents make of their friendships. The aim of the proposed research was to hear and understand the perspectives of African Nova Scotian youth, regarding the topic of 'friendships and educational experiences'. To that end, this study gathered the youths' perspectives, which explored the meanings that African Nova Scotian youth attribute to their friendships, and how such interpersonal relationships might influence their educational experiences through focus group discussions (Appendix C), individual interviews (Appendix C), and the collection of demographic survey information (Appendix D).

Focus Groups

This study employed the use of focus groups since they are useful for the discussion of topics relevant to people's everyday lives and experiences (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). Furthermore, it was felt that it would be an appropriate means by which to gather the perspectives of adolescent Black learners. As Morgan (2002) notes, focus groups provide individuals who are not part of mainstream society a voice to discuss issues of specific personal and group relevance. Rich et al. (1999), suggest that the "open focus group", in which a facilitator guides conversation on a particular issue, or the "nominal group technique", in which the group generates solutions to one question, are most appropriate methods for research with adolescents (p. 373). Focus groups, consisting of peers, can provide a natural environment that allows accurate and honest accounts to be provided by youth (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). Morgan (2004) states that, "what makes the discussions in focus groups more than the sums of separate individual

interviews, is the fact that the participants both query each other, and explain themselves to each other" (p. 272). Berg (2004) mentions, that the interaction between the participants opens issues for further exploration. In addition, focus groups offer the opportunity to directly observe the extent of agreement or disagreement between the participants, and for the researcher to invite participants to reflect upon one another's comments. Notwithstanding, Morgan (2004) mentions that focus groups do possess certain limitations, including the number of topics that can be discussed due to the time required for mutual self-disclosure, the possible influence of peer pressure or negative group critique upon discussion members, and the potentially constraining effects of open discussion of sensitive subjects among peer participants.

Interviewing

The qualitative interview has developed as an increasingly appropriate and preferred means by which to gather data pertaining to the field of education (Tierney & Dilley, 2002). Taylor et al. (1984) describe the qualitative interview as *flexible* and *dynamic* due to the unstructured nature of the exchange between the researcher and the participant. Walford (2001) considers the research interview as a way to allow people to express their views on particular issues and provides the researcher with means to generate a volume of data quickly. Tierney et al. (2002) mention, that the increase in the use of student interviews in educational research is part of an effort to include "the voices of those being educated in the learning process" (p. 458). Meanwhile, Eder et al. (2002) suggest that interviews of youth provide them with an opportunity to express their interpretations and thoughts.

Sample

The sample consisted of 12 (5 male and 7 female) Black youth who self-identified as being African Nova Scotian. The youth were all attending junior high school (grades 7 to 9) in the Halifax Regional Municipality, and were aged between twelve to sixteen years, inclusive. The youth were recruited from within the African Nova Scotian community with the assistance of Steve Benton, Halifax Regional Educator with the Black Educators Association (BEA) of Nova Scotia (Appendix F). Mr. Benton knew the youths through his participation and direct involvement with Black youth in both the school system and community projects (e.g., workshops, tutoring programs) that support and accommodate the educational needs of Black learners and their families in the Halifax/Halifax County region of Nova Scotia.

Mr. Benton's role, as a community member directly involved in improving the educational experience of African Nova Scotian youth, provided a wide range of benefits to the study. These benefits included access to the community through a liaison whose active involvement in the community provided a familiar and credible means to assist in the recruitment of Black youth. In addition, the BEA provided a well-known and convenient location for the youth to meet for the group and individual interviews. The knowledge gained from this study has been shared with the BEA (the researcher has provided a copy of the completed study) for them to keep as a resource for the community and for consideration in their educational program planning.

Procedures and Data Gathering

The source of data for this research study was African Nova Scotian youth between the ages of twelve to sixteen years, inclusive, who attended various junior high schools (grades 7 to 9) in the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM), Nova Scotia. Once the research proposal was approved by thesis committee and the University Research Ethics Board (UREB), the youth were recruited with the assistance of Steve Benton, the Halifax Regional Educator with the Black Educators Association (BEA). Mr. Benton was provided with a Letter of Information (Appendix A), which outlined the purpose of the study and the Halifax Regional Educator's involvement in the recruitment of the youth participants. The researcher provided Mr. Benton with additional verbal direction concerning the recruitment of the youth. More specifically, the researcher had emphasized to Mr. Benton that the study sought the participation of youth who met the above-mentioned criteria regardless of whether they did or did not have friends at the time of the study.

Letters of Information for the youth (Appendix A) and parent(s) /guardian(s) (Appendix A) were given to potential participants and their parent (s)/guardian(s) by Mr. Benton. Youth who expressed an interest in participating in the study then provided their names to Mr. Benton who then forwarded the names to the researcher. After receiving the names of potential participants, the researcher contacted each youth and his/her parent(s) /guardian(s) by telephone. The research purpose and process were discussed in detail with the parent(s) /guardian(s) and the youth via telephone conversations.

Following the expression of willingness to participate in the study, the youth and his/her parent(s)/guardian(s) were asked to sign documents of Informed Consent to

participate in a focus group session and/or individual interview (Appendix B). The signed document of Informed Consent by the youth indicated agreement to participate in the study with understanding of assured confidentiality, the proper storage (i.e., locked file cabinet), and destruction (i.e., shredding, university departmental disposal box) of all research materials (i.e., audiotapes, transcribed notes) upon completion of the study. The Informed Consent document also outlined the youth's voluntary participation and right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. Dates and times for the group and/or individual interviews were arranged with the parent(s)/guardian(s) and the youth to provide for the convenience of all participants.

In order to elicit and examine the perspectives of the youth, the data was collected in three semi-structured focus group sessions that were organized in the following manner: one mixed gender group of four participants (1 male/3 female), one group of three males, and one group of two females. Additionally, three youths (one male and two females) chose to participate in semi-structured individual interviews.

The group and individual sessions varied in duration depending on the number of participants present and the depth of the discussion. Prior to the start of each session, the researcher explained the research purpose and process and asked youth who had not yet signed their documents of Informed Consent (Appendix B) to do so before the start of the session. The youth then completed a Demographic Survey (see Appendix D). Prior to the start of focus group sessions, the researcher discussed the confidentiality that was expected concerning information shared within the group and requested that each participant sign a Group Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendix E).

The sessions were audiotaped and a notebook was used by the researcher in order to discretely record and retain useful supplementary information including researcher impressions/ observations during the focus group discussions (e.g., order of participants' comments, non-verbal behaviours, tone of comments and exchanges) and individual interviews. Focus group and individual interview questions were semi-structured (Appendix C), which allowed additional questions to be generated as the discussion unfolded. The youth received monetary compensation for their participation in the study.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data provides the opportunity to obtain the perspectives of the participants in their own words, wherein the verbatim accounts gathered from participant group and/or individual interviews provide the data for analysis (Patton, 1990). In the present study, this method of data collection enabled the researcher to explore the participants' experiences as they emerged within reflective facilitated discussion (Patton, 1990). Detailed notes and audiotapes were used to record the participants' statements in the group and individual discussions (Bogdan et al., 1982). The audiotapes were later transcribed verbatim by the researcher and three copies of the transcripts were made, two for the purpose of analysis and one copy was kept as an original (Patton, 1990). Patton (1990) points out that "the researcher is the instrument", therefore; the validity depends on the skill, competence, and rigor of the researcher (p. 14). *Dependability* and *confirmability* within the research was addressed by the use of two coders, which provided cross-comparative data analysis (Fitzgerald, 1994). *Rigor* in the research was

sought by further exploration of the issues as they emerged and as the research developed (Rich et al., 1999). Qualitative research considers *reliability* as a *fit* between what is recorded and what actually occurred, as opposed to consistency across different observations (Bogdan et al., 1982).

The coding process commenced with the careful reading of each transcript while considering each line of the verbatim written text (Bogdan et al., 1982). Key words, phrases, themes, concepts, and other significant information or expressions, were underlined and noted as relevant text based on the research concerns and extracted as *in vivo*, first level codes (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Fitzgerald, 1994). Through open and cross-comparative coding, the extracted data was further organized and clustered into more conceptualized and thematic second level codes (Fitzgerald, 1994). A third level of coding of data was undertaken for the purpose of adding density or saturation to the data (Fitzgerald, 1994). Finally, four main categories emerged from the patterns that appeared in the data and provided an inductive means by which to ground, interpret, and discuss the data (Berg, 2004; Fitzgerald, 1994) (see: Selected Sample of Coding, Figure 3).

Ethics

Full disclosure of the research process to all involved, namely, the Black Educators Association, parents/guardians, and the youth participants provided transparency in the study. In addition, prior to agreeing to involvement in the study, the BEA, youth informants, and parent(s)/guardian(s), received a Letter of Information, and had any research-related concerns addressed either in person or via telephone. The BEA,

participants, and parent(s)/guardian(s) were provided with contact information for the researcher, her thesis supervisor, and the University Research Ethics Board (UREB).

Confidentiality was maintained by providing participants with anonymity during the study. A coding system was employed to protect the identity of the participants in the transcription of the group sessions and the interviews. Only the researcher and her thesis supervisor were privy to the identity of the participants. In addition, it was emphasized to the focus group participants, by the student researcher, that all information shared in the group is to be kept private and the participants were required to sign a Group Confidentiality Agreement (see Appendix E).

The materials used to gather data for the study were properly stored and disposed of upon completion of the study. The audiotapes with information obtained from the group and individual sessions were stored in a locked cabinet at the home of the researcher until they were fully transcribed and the research was complete. Within three months of the internal (MSVU) publication of the study, research materials were put into a MSVU documents bin for disposal and destruction.

Participants were fully informed of the research process and of their right to stop the taping of the group and/or individual session at any time. They were also told of their right not to answer any questions and of their right to withdraw completely from the study without consequence. The participants and their parent(s)/guardian(s) signed a Letter of Informed Consent (see Appendix B) agreeing to participation in the study and confirming their understanding of the research process and their rights.

Given the everyday and non-threatening nature of the research topic, friendships and school experiences, as anticipated, there was a low level of harm or risk associated

with participation in this study. Notwithstanding, participants were informed by that

should any emotional or psychological discomfort develop during or subsequent to

discussions in the group or individual sessions, the researcher would be available for both

immediate support and referral, if needed, to additional sources of assistance.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

Youth study participants offered valuable perspectives concerning the role of friendships within their daily school experiences as Black learners at the junior high school level. The views of these youth, conveyed through group and individual discussions, provided insight and better understanding concerning the relevance of such interpersonal relationships in school. Moreover, the youth expressed the influence that others, both within and outside of the school setting (e.g., peers, parents, teachers), may have in helping or hindering the formation of such friendships. The following major descriptive and representative categories emerged from systematic qualitative analysis and serve to organize and report the research findings: Friendship Formation and Development, Friendship Quality and Function, Friendship Maintenance, and Friendship Enhancement/Support. Discussion of the results is further organized by subheadings composed of higher second and third level codes subsumed within the major categories.

FRIENDSHIP FORMATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Friendship Elements

Friendship sources. Youth mentioned a variety of settings, conditions, or circumstances where they might typically develop friendships. These sources included their area schools, community organizations (e.g., YMCA), local events (e.g., the fair), churches, neighbourhoods, malls, youth groups, the internet, and by way of other friends.

One youth elaborated on her experience of finding friends in school and within her community:

> I have more friends in school because whenever you have to ask a question, you can just ask the person beside you ... then you might find that they have stuff in common with you and, you never know, they might just become your best friend. Also, I have friends at home and I meet friends through other people. Like, some friends introduce me to other people and then we might become really good friends... then next thing you know you might have a lot of friends because everybody knows somebody that they can introduce you to.

Friendship composition and meanings. Youth mentioned that their friends often share similar characteristics, and that their friendships typically involve males and females, as well as individual and group relationships. One youth emphasized the following in regard to the similarity of personalities and behaviours as found within his circle of friends, "They are all the same". Another youth stated that her friendships usually are found within group relationships comprised of "two friends or more".

The nature, value, and meaning of friendship to the youth participants primarily resided within non-judgemental and equal status peers with whom they felt mutually trustworthy, comfortable, and open. As one youth stated, "You feel uncomfortable with grown ups and you feel better with people your own age". Another youth stated, "I can talk to my friends different than how I talk to my teachers and parents...like the way I joke around with my friends; I would probably get in trouble if I did that to my parents". Another youth, combining the element of openness with predictability, commented, "You can tell your friends more things than you can tell your family because you don't know

how they'll [family] react". Still others stated, "With teachers, it is more of a teacher-student relationship and not a friendship", and:

> You can always tell your friends things. I can have fun with my friends, and I don't have to be as polite to them as I am to teachers and parents. I can goof off and I don't have to be as serious. I don't care about my peers as much as I care about my friends.

Teacher/School and Social Barriers (to friendship formation and development)

Negative teacher characteristics. While most youth expressed general liking and appreciation for their schoolteachers, (one student noting how she felt able to trust and confide in her teachers), they nonetheless, tended to view their teachers as somewhat unsupportive of friendships within their classrooms and the larger school setting. The youth identified several negative teacher attitudes and behaviours, which they felt actively, discouraged friendship formation and maintenance. Such negative attitudes and behaviours included, an unwillingness to consider students' desire to be seated near and interact with friends in the classroom ("they'll be like, 'who would you like' and then they will [pick] one out of the group that you would like"; "they will put you with people that you don't feel comfortable being around"), a tendency to negatively associate certain friendship groups and those within them (i.e., being labelled as a 'bad kid' with 'bad' friends), remoteness and inflexibility ("teachers, you can't talk to [them] about anything"; "you can't work with them...they won't even give you a chance"), and an obligation on the part of teachers to consult with parents about student-related issues, "Teachers, they have to tell your mom [even] if you don't want [them] to tell your mom. They have to tell your parents [even] if you don't want [them] to tell your parents".

Negative teacher treatment (Black students). Youth also cited their sense of being treated differently by their teachers than their non-Black classmates. As one youth expressed, "I think that he [teacher] only picks on Black people…if we ask to use the washroom, then he will say 'no', but if a White person asks, then he will say 'sure, go'". Another youth identified unfair treatment in his teacher's inconsistent reprimanding of student behaviour:

> There are other races that sit there and they talk about everything, from X-Box games to books, or whatever, and they don't work. Then, I'll sit there and talk about what I am doing after school, like playing basketball or something, and the teacher will tell me to stop talking before they tell them… then I just get mad.

Social barriers. Asked about possible difficulties or challenges they may have encountered in forming friendships outside of school, the youth primarily associated these with occasional experiences of social exclusion and racism within predominately White social settings or institutions:

> When I went to [community] to visit my brother, every time we go there we stop at [name of restaurant] and they give me dirty looks because we are the only Black people there… they will all stare at you like you're crazy.

Further comments suggested that negative racial stereotypes, as found in mainstream society, often play an undermining role in the forming of interracial friendships. One youth remarked, "Some will just get [expletive] with you just because you're Black or just because you're White, or whatever", a sentiment echoed by another youth, "Most people, they fear Black people…they all think that we are going to end up in jail".

Barriers to socializing with friends. Proximity, both within and outside of school, was identified by the youth as a key barrier to socializing with friends. While for some, this involved living in separate neighbourhoods or communities ("They all live far down the road from me"), for others proximity was an issue involving different schools, grade levels, or curriculum schedules ("People in different grades. You can't talk with them that much").

Youth commented that interracial friendships were particularly challenged, especially outside of school, by different community locations, activities, and past-times (e.g., a preference for basketball or soccer, as recreation). As one youth pointed out, "They're in different places. Like we're down here and they are up there [closer to school]... if we want to play basketball, then we have to go up there to play with them".

Barriers to communication with peers (White). Youth mentioned that a key distinction between their friendships with same race and other race youth included a difference in the use of slang language. As one youth stated, "You can't say the slang thing...you can't say particular stuff around the other people, but when [you're] with your own people you can". Another youth voiced, "They won't get it", while yet another agreed by commenting, "Some people you grew up with, other Black people, they know what you are talking about and stuff". An additional youth offered, "I can't talk the same way. Like the way I talk when I am with [...] and [...], I can't talk the same way when I am with my friends that are White cause they don't really understand". This youth also noted, a difference in the use of slang language may be apparent depending on the racial makeup of a particular school, "The way that we talk at school is different than how

people talk at [...] or like [...]. Slang terms that were cited as examples included, "buck", as substituting for the word "friend", and the pronunciation of the letters "g", and "d" to replace the letters "th", at the beginning of some words.

Relationship Similarities and Differences

Most youth agreed that considerably more differences than similarities exist between their friendships and their other significant relationships. Only one youth considered his friendships and other relationships to be similar. As earlier mentioned, the youth attributed generally higher levels of comfort, trust, openness, and consistency to their friendships than to other major relationships. One youth mentioned her higher level of discomfort when discussing personal issues with her family than with her friends because of the uncertainty of their reactions. Another youth explained how her friendships differ from relationships with teachers, parents, and siblings as far as comfort in the sharing of personal information:

> My friendships with my teachers, well, my teacher [name], and like my friends is really different...like I can talk to my friends different than how I talk to my teachers and my parents. Like the way I joke around with my friends, I would probably get in trouble if I did that to my parents or with my brother and sister.

Friendship Selection Elements

Friendship selection criteria. Various criteria were identified by the youth participants regarding the selection of individuals as potential friends from among their peer group. Compatibility, engaging in similar behaviour, living in the same neighbourhood, length of time knowing, and familiarity with the individual were each

cited as features influencing friendship desirability. Having academic status ("smarts") and a good academic work ethic were also noted as being important elements related to friendship selection, especially when a youth's goal pertains to academic success. Such 'academic', school-based friends, however, were not always active as out of school relationships, and at least for one youth, engaged in only as a matter of personal educational benefit and [incidentally] involving race:

> I hang with all groups of people that I don't usually hang with outside of school and whatever. I just hang with them in class cause I know that they will get their work done or whatever...the smart people...I don't mean to be racist or anything, but like White people. I hang with Black people after school.

Most youth agreed, however, that neither a person's skin colour, nor their gender, were particular factors in friendship choice, depending, as one female youth expressed, on one's degree of personal comfort, "It's just that I don't like hanging around other people who aren't like cousins with me, like boys". Unlike race or gender, an individual's age was cited as an important friendship feature, with most of the participants preferring to associate themselves with youth around their same age or older. As one youth explained, younger individuals tended to be less mature and trustworthy:

> If they act like they're older then I will hang with them, but people that are like children, act childish. Because people that are children, right, they got a lot of mouth-well not children, but people that are younger than me tend to have the most mouth that would tell somebody something that I said that wasn't true-like he said, she said...and they will tell their little friends, which will tell their older brothers or sisters, or whatever, and then you got conflict right there on your hands.

While another youth, commenting on older youth offered:

> I don't want to be a friend with somebody who is two years older than me
> because we probably have nothing that close together as somebody who
> would be one year older or the same age. I prefer if it is a person who is
> the same age.

As somewhat of a balancing view, a further youth opined, "There are people that are younger than you, but could still be more mature than you".

Finally, the role of one's appearance was noted as a factor in friendship selection. As a female participant stated that, while she does not embrace this criterion, she recognizes this as a common tendency among her female peers:

> If someone is new to our school, they will be like 'ew!', look at her
> clothes, look at her hair...they can be haters, as in like, 'ew!', look at her
> toenails, or something... they're not painted'.

Influences on friend selection. While some youth stated that neither their teachers, parents, nor their peers particularly influenced whom they selected as a friend, others commented that each of these groups, at times, played a significant and not always welcome role in guiding and influencing their friendship selections:

> Some of my friends don't like other people, but the teachers try to make them be friends...

> Well, like, if you see somebody that you would probably like to be [your]
> friend, maybe some people have negative opinions about them... it kinda
> changes your mind. So, it is kind of hard to make friends if some people
> don't like them, but it shouldn't be.

> It is the same outside of school. I don't do that, but it does happen a lot. I
> don't really listen to what my other friends have to say about the person.
> Sometimes parents do, 'cause they don't think that person is the right
> friend for you so, that kind of changes your mind and you don't really
> hang with them any more.

One youth expressed that friendship cannot be forced. Although it was mentioned that her parents do not influence whom she selects as a friend, she stated, "My parents, like don't really tell me who to hang with. They just tell me like, 'don't be around bad people'". Another youth mentioned that while her parents do not select whom she chooses as a friend, they do caution her against unhealthy friendship choices. While another youth stated, "If your mom hears something about your friend that you hang with, then she'll tell you not to play or hang with them". Another youth spoke of the way in which her mother and teacher attempt to influence those with whom she may choose to associate or socialize:

> My mom will like say like 'oh, no, I don't like her history' or whatever, so, she won't let me hang with them… or, like, she will see that they are allowed to do anything and they don't have no guidance or anything, and then my mom won't let me hang with them. Or, my teachers will be like, 'You were doing fine until you hung with so and so'.

Another youth commented on his opposing opinion to one teacher's negative estimation of a valued friend's influence:

> I have a friend who is always in trouble with the law and this teacher don't like him, but she likes me, but she don't like him, and she thinks that I am going to get in trouble cause I'm around him, but I disagree.

This same youth mentioned that the only person who influences his friend selection is his mom, as he stated, "I gotta respect my mom".

FRIENDSHIP QUALITY AND FUNCTION

School Friendship Influences and Effects

Positive influence of friends. All youth agreed that supportive friends have a positive influence on their academic performance in school. The youth seemed to benefit from collaboration with friends on class assignments and from participation in school activities. One youth mentioned that she performs "better and faster" when working with a friend on school assignments. Another youth commented that when she is partnered with a friend, she does not have to go to the Learning Centre to get extra help with her work. Still another youth described her experience collaborating with a school friend as uplifting and 'fun', while not distracting from her actual schooling:

> I have a friend who helps me in school if I ever have questions and we
> help each other out in school and also at home. We are not so serious,
> except when at school. She is fun to hang around, supportive; she helps
> me concentrate because she doesn't talk so much in classes. She is
> hilarious and we have tons of things in common. She makes school more
> fun than it usually is.

Youth further shared that having friends join with them in school activities encouraged their own participation by having someone involved with whom they were already familiar and could 'talk to', "You would probably want to go on teams if your friend is there".

Negative influence of friends. Youth also noted the negative influence of less academically supportive friends in school. One youth commented that, at times, his friends would actively try to distract him from doing his schoolwork and that he would

respond to them in a similar manner. This same youth noted that his friends' negative behaviours extended beyond academics to athletics, although he was determined to follow his own choices and desired involvements:

> If they said, 'don't join the basketball team' cause they don't like the couch or whatever, but I like basketball... why would I not join? That's their decision, that's their point on the person or whatever...I just go and if I don't like the guy, then I would probably quit.

Negative effect of friends. Youth discussed several negative effects that friends, at times, have on their school experiences; among which, school attendance was prominent. As the youth discussed, unpleasant and hurtful interactions with friends, both in and out of school, might result in ongoing peer disputes, rumour-making, teasing, or rejection, each significantly diminishing their desire and motivation to attend school:

> If something happens to you, like, say you get in a fight on the weekend; you don't want to go back to school. You feel that you're going to be embarrassed [and] that keeps people from getting their education.

> People could be like, they'll say they'll be your friend, or whatever, and then they make up stuff [or] they'll say they don't want to be your friend and they will make up stuff about you. They'll get somebody mad at you then you won't want to go to school. You're afraid cause you know they're not going to be your friend, they're not going to have your back or whatever, and then you'll get beat up... people won't want to go to school.

Influences on friendship transitions. Youth expressed that the school setting occasionally influences the behaviour of their friends and the stability of their friendships. One youth suggested that some of the friendships she forms over the summer months do not continue when school resumes. In her opinion, being at school,

critically changed how certain friends behaved, both generally and in terms of their friendship loyalties, when in school ("The way they act, how they talk, who they hang with, how they treat other people wrong"). Another youth spoke of her experience of a friendship ending as a result of the transition between schools:

> It could be a friend that you hung with your whole life and they will turn against you. If they are in a bigger population like highschool and I am still in junior high. [It's as if] they went to bigger and better, and they forgot about you.

Characteristics of Friends

Positive characteristics of friends. Youth described their 'true' friends as having certain positive characteristics, including being social companions, reliable ("I can always talk to my friends"), and available to emotionally support and comfort them in times of need ("Somebody who is always there for you"; "Are only a phone call away if you need something in the middle of the night"; "If you ever feel like you are alone or something, they will always be there by your side"). They also noted that their supportive friends are trustworthy confidants ("Somebody who you can tell your secrets to and not think that they would spread it"; "They don't judge you"), honest, kind, forgiving, and, in the context of the overall discussion, assisted them with their schoolwork and educational progress ("They will help you with your schoolwork").

Negative characteristics of friends. Youth also identified negative characteristics of friends, including being duplicitous ("two-faced"), unsupportive, untrustworthy, unpredictable, and hurtful in their insensitivity or outright meanness. For

some youth, these characteristics and behaviours resulted in feelings of humiliation,

embarrassment, and betrayal, as certain 'true friendships' revealed themselves to be

painfully otherwise. The following remarks by some youth emphasize these negative

characteristics:

> Some friendships you might think that they will last a long time, but they really won't, because the other person will turn on you, just like that (snaps fingers).

> Some friendships you can tell them things and they will say that they won't say nothin and then they will tell another person.

> [In the presence of peers] Oh, remember the time that you got beat up?

Characteristics of Best Friends

Positive characteristics of best friends. 'Best friends' were described by youth

as having similar characteristics to other valued friends (e.g., confidants, trustworthy,

reliable, available, and emotionally supportive), but even moreso, especially in vital areas

of personal relationships:

> Best friends are people who are *really* close, so you can tell them anything. But, [other] friends, sometimes you can't really trust them. Best friends you hang out with them a lot and friends you just see them once in a while... you don't really talk to them a lot.

> Best friends are different than my friends because I can tell them my deepest secrets and know that they won't tell anyone. Your trust is much more deeper than your other friends because you have more things in common. We can talk about more things, we can gossip. That's not always a good thing, but we can do it if we want to. A best friend is there for you more than your other friends.

FRIENDSHIP MAINTENANCE

Friendship Patterns

Friendship Stability. Youth participants mentioned that, for the most part, their friendships are relatively long lasting and they are able to reconcile differences that may occur. Youth generally concurred, however, that the breaking of trust within their friendship relationships was particularly egregious and difficult to regain once betrayed. Youth tended to agree with the observation of one group member who offered that the various stages ('cycles') involved in friendships were able to survive their occasional relational challenges and demands:

> You start off with meeting each other, then you're close, then you start moving further apart and start arguing. You end up not being friends any more, and then you make up. Now you're friends and you gain each other's trust again. Then it just keeps going on and on.

At the same time, however, youth cited that it is not always possible to reconcile and 'move on' with certain individuals or groups, although much more likely to occur with best friends, "If you call them like your best friend or whatever, you're gonna have fights" (but it won't end the relationship).

Friendship Adaptations

Maintaining "self" in friendships. Most youth participants conveyed that they do not change their behaviour, attitudes, or personality when around different friends. More particularly, youth expressed that they do not feel the need to conform to interests, activities, styling, or behaviours, the same as their White friends. For example, it was

suggested that some White females in the school they attend dress differently (skimpier clothing, do not match their clothes to the same extent that Black females do), dance differently, and listen to different music (Rock as opposed to Hip-hop and Rap). One youth emphasized that each person in a friendship should be able to maintain their "self", as an integral part of mutual respect and individuality within such relationships:

> There are no differences-everybody is equal. I have friends, who are Black, Chinese, French, but I don't see a difference in them, other than language. All races are equal... they might be a different culture, but I don't see a difference. Even though I am half Black and half White, my friends treat me like everyone else and I do the same to them. That is probably why we are friends. That's how friends treat friends.

Adjusting "self" in friendships. While generally agreeing that positive friendships involve equality and mutuality, youth did identify that certain accommodation or change of attitude and behaviour in friendships was an occasional occurrence and challenge, particularly related to race. One youth shared, that while she has a tendency to become "hyperactive" (overly energetic and expressive) at times, her Black friends responded more acceptingly to this behaviour, owing in part, she felt, to their increased time with one another. In contrast, she finds herself modifying and being self-conscious about her behaviour around her White peers. Another youth spoke of being challenged to accept her White friend's preference for Rock music, given her own interest in Hip-hop and Rap. Yet another youth conveyed her appreciation of the effort made by her White friends to understand and join in the use of certain language and expressions used among her Black friends.

FRIENDSHIP ENHANCEMENT AND SUPPORT

Students' Social Experiences and Adaptations

Negative feelings/experiences as students in the minority. Youth participants, who attend school with a predominately White student population, articulated feelings of discomfort and exclusion within the classroom and the broader school setting. One youth noted that (White) students often give her "looks" and that she experiences feeling "Really weird if I am the only Black person in the group. I do, I feel really weird, creepy". Another youth expressed, "It's always different, cause I'm Black", while yet another youth stated that, for him, "It's not that you feel weird, it's just that you feel uncomfortable...you feel left out, like you don't fit in".

Social adaptation strategies. Youth mentioned conforming certain attitudes and behaviour to those of White students as a way to 'fit in'. For these students, the prospect of having fewer school-based friends was worse than altering themselves, within limits: "You gotta act a certain way...if you don't, then they're gonna look at you and say you're weird. You can't be yourself". Notwithstanding, and consistent with earlier sentiments expressed by a number of youth related to maintaining their personal identities, values and integrity (see: Maintaining "self" in friendships), youth participants generally agreed that one's self-respect was ultimately more important to them than being accepted by others:

> I don't care, if they don't like me then they don't like me...I'll be all alone or I
> will hang out with other Black people.

> People at school who aren't really my friends, they don't talk, they don't
> say 'hi'... they either tell you to move or they just shove you out of the
> way. They don't have any respect for you and that ruins my day at school.
> I just ignore them; I don't pay any attention to them. If they don't want to
> talk to me, then I don't want to talk to them.

With some resolution, most focus group members agreed that certain social adjustment and personal resiliency was part of the nature of peer relations, however unwelcome. One youth stated, "Eventually you adapt to people making fun of you and you just don't worry about it no more". While another youth commented, "Whatever don't kill you will make you stronger".

School Friendship Supports

Classroom considerations as friendship supports. Focus group youth suggested initiatives that teachers might undertake to encourage and promote friendships between students within their classroom settings. Allowing students to have greater choice in their classroom seating designations, with mind to friendships, and providing the opportunity for students of the same grade level to be in courses with friends, were two such desired changes with one youth suggesting, "They could sit in their own seats, like the teacher wouldn't tell them where to sit. They could just sit by themselves, like with a buddy". While another youth recommended the following as a way to develop friendship among students at the same grade level, but who are in different classrooms, "The teacher could have activities where you can choose partners from other people in other classes who are in the same grade".

School activities as friendship supports. Most youth agreed that a game day would provide an excellent opportunity to both associate with existing friends and to make new friends. Other suggested activities included school trips, after school social clubs, and team sports such as basketball and floor hockey. One youth mentioned that her school has a peer-helping program, which she finds to be particularly supportive of friendship development:

> At our school, we have peer helping... if you have a problem then you can go to them about your friends. They help and make it better. If you want help in making friends, you could probably find some good tips at peer helping.

School activities as friendship supports (Black students). An entertainment room where students could sit and talk about their day, greater access to the gymnasium, a school-wide activity day, and Black intramural sports, were each suggested by youth participants as school offerings that might promote and support same-race friendships among Black youth. As a group, the youth agreed that they would not want any suggested activity to interfere with their learning, citing lunchtime as the most appropriate time to socialize within the regular school day.

Overall, the comments expressed by the youth indicated the strongly shared view that schools could and should play a vital and increased role in fostering friendship formation and development, quality and function, maintenance, and enhancement/support among all students. Moreover, according to the perspectives of these Black learners, as supportive friendships provide benefits to their daily lives and school experiences (i.e., academic performance, sense of inclusion, and social competencies) particular awareness

and sensitivity toward their friendship needs are especially warranted when they are the racial minority within the broader student population.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study provide valuable insight into the perceived role and influence that friendships have on the social adjustment/functioning and academic experiences of young Black Nova Scotian learners. Within the research interviews, participant youth voiced their perspectives with openness, thought, and enthusiasm, as they considered the nature and effect of friendship relationships in their everyday living, and more particularly, in their context as Black learners at the junior high school grade level. In this regard, foremost for the youth participants, was their shared sense that friendships actively played a vital and critical role in both their daily lives outside of school and within their regular school experiences. The Discussion and Implications chapter is organized by the study's overall *Research Questions*.

Research Question #1:

How do Black youth conceptualize the role and meaning of friendship in their everyday lives?

Youth participants, through their comments identifying friendships as distinct personal relationships, with value, changeability, and consequence in their lives, conveyed typical adolescent developmental needs (e.g., attachment, inclusion, raised self-esteem, emotional support) and features of adolescent friendship formation and maintenance noted in research (Aboud et al., 1996; Buhrmester, 1996; Hartup et al., 1997; Newcomb et al., 1999). In doing so, the youth expressed that friendships do hold great importance for them each, as they strive, among other challenges, to be socially

accepted by desired peers and to benefit from the closeness and bonding that often occurs within trusted and mutual relationships.

As they discussed the nature of their various friendships in further detail, it became more evident that within their various friendship selections, adaptations, and transitions, youth had particular differences and individual needs, related to their sense of what friendships offer, involve, and sometimes require. Here, youth participants shared the deeper and more personalized meanings and significance they associated with these relationships, as 'friendships' at various levels of closeness, and trusted, consistent conduct, provided the context and involvement for their development of social competencies, social values, and feelings of acceptance, worth, genuineness, and personal security.

Whether their friends were located in their neighbourhoods, churches, community youth groups, or schools, the friendships described by the participants represented the "unique context for development" identified by Newcomb et al. (1996, p.290), which contains "distinct meanings and significance" Giordano (2003, p. 257), not found in other significant relationships. Accordingly, interviewed youth tended to find their greatest personal comfort and fulfillment, as well the their greatest appreciation of the meaning of friendship itself, within relationships with their most trusted and reliable "best" friends, regardless of race, gender, age, or other distinguishing feature. Notwithstanding, many youth did find developmental friendship values and meaning in same sex, peer relationships in which they felt they were personally regarded, able to be themselves, behaved toward genuinely, and supported in their education, health, and general well-being.

For these youth, friends (as found in dyadic and group relationships, comprised of same aged males and females) provide a distinct source of emotional, social, and academic support. They see their friends as those with whom they would share more personal and intimate information about themselves, trusting in their supportive reactions and confidentiality. In this regard, the value and meaning these youth place on their friendships is similar to that suggested by research on adolescent friendships, as these relationships provide for closeness, bonding, acceptance, support, social practice, and values development (Buhrmester, 1996; Buhrmester et al., 1986; Hartup, 1989; Hartup et al., 1997; Newcomb et al., 1999; Van Lieshout et al., 1999). Best friends, as reported by these youth, serve similar purposes, albeit on a much deeper level and with increased stability within the relationship.

Finally, as interviewed youth spoke of their friendships in the context of their own developing independence and ability to enter into self-chosen peer relationships, they did so as a reflection of their own needs and desires, not seemingly as a form of "compensation" for areas of deficit, such as family (Giordano et al, 1993). To the contrary, the youth spoke positively of the continued supportive role of their parents, in keeping with reports that parents continue to maintain a supportive role while adolescents exercise independence and develop their friendships (Giordano, 2003).

The high degree of meaning and value that the interviewed youth ascribe to and derive from their friendships speaks to their vital and normal need to form and develop critical peer connections. Although, as described, these relationships may vary in composition, activity, closeness, trustworthiness, support, mutual regard, and overall level of satisfaction for those involved, focus group youth considered their friendships

significant enough to merit settings, opportunities, and supports for their development and enhancement.

Research Question #2:

How do Black youth conceptualize the role or influence of friendship in their educational experiences?

Black focus group youth, in keeping with research noting the reciprocal influence that friendships have upon students' school experiences (Gifford-Smith et al., 2003), conveyed how their fellow classmates, school friends, school personnel, the classroom, and other facilities and activities within the school, both affected and were influenced by their personal friendships at school. Such matters as school attendance, level of school interest, school performance, sense of school inclusion, and participation in school activities (e.g., sports), were each seen as critically affected by the nature of their school friendships, along with the degree of support and understanding they perceived these relationships as receiving from significant others, most notably their teachers and parents.

Consistent with previous research addressing Black learners (Clark, 1991; Goodenow et al., 1993), interviewed youth generally felt, and experienced, that their friendships played a positive and supportive role in their overall school experiences and academic achievement. They spoke of feeling a greater sense of inclusion at school, more positive attitude toward their education, and increased incentive to participate in school activities. Even more particularly, and reflecting previous research findings citing the benefits of school friendship collaborations (Berndt et al., 1995; Hartup, 1996b; Zajac et al., 1997), improved problem solving, motivation, communication, and academic performance (e.g., working better and faster, remaining on task, completion of

assignments, and good grades). Additionally, some youth mentioned that partnering with a friend to complete school assignments may replace or lessen the need for certain students to seek individual academic assistance outside of the classroom (e.g., learning centres), thus decreasing the stigma associated with receiving external classroom support for everyday seatwork.

While the focus group youth generally shared a strong preference to be active with friends at school, especially in sport and recreational activities, a number of the youth participants emphasized their unwillingness to allow uninterested or non-involved friends to dissuade or distract them from their own interests and goals, academic and otherwise. Such expressions of personal purpose, self-respect, and commitment to their self-chosen pursuits, speaks most positively to developed self-efficacy, ego strengths, and an optimistic view toward both current and future possibilities for involvement in their lives, and reflects previous research conducted by Smith (2000), reporting that Black youth in Halifax and Toronto value school and are positive about their futures. In all, Black youth in the present study strongly indicated that they are more likely to be influenced by the positive, rather than negative, features and pressures of their school based friendships.

Notwithstanding, comment was made by several youth regarding certain racially related considerations that they contend with as they select and interact with their non-Black school friends. Specifically, youth spoke of certain adaptations and adjustments, which they made to accommodate their racially different friends, and of their various motives to befriend other race peers, particularly White students. That a number of the youth participants reflected in their comments the view that their White classmates were

particularly 'smart' and more helpful in assisting with academic matters than their Black peers, accords with an identified tendency by some Black youth to feel they need to 'act White' or engage the assistance of their White peers in order to further their academic success or life aspirations/opportunities (Bergin et al., 2002; Ford et al., 1996; Fordham, 1988; Horvat et al., 2003; Kester, 1994; Schofield, 1981). In itself, this speaks to the crucial need for Black students to be further aware of, and take pride in, the competencies and skills within their own racial peer group, avoiding the stereotype that other students, as a group (particularly White), are superior in nature or talent to their own racial and cultural peers.

Given that negative assumptions and estimations of the worth of one's own racial, ethnic, or cultural affiliation may debilitate one's sense of self-value and personal efficacy, schools should make a concerted effort to dispel such negative racial stereotypes among students. The promotion of cultural awareness and the highlighting of the positive distinctions of Black role models and mentors (above and beyond what is presented during Black History month) might assist in achieving that goal. Further, effort should be made within school settings to connect Black students with academically capable same race peers in order to dispel such racially stereotyped assumptions of race-specific assets/competencies, and to support same race connections and affiliations.

Research Question #3:

From the perspective of Black youth, what factors related to friendship affect their experience of social competency (adjustment, satisfaction) and personal identity within their everyday school experiences?

Interviewed youth expressed an interest and willingness in forming interracial friendships, provided they would only have to make minor personal changes (e.g., some behaviours and interests) to accommodate these relationships. At the same time, however, Black youth within the study, consistent with previous research (HRSB, 2003), generally indicated that they felt greater levels of comfort when around Black peers within social and friendship contexts. For the most part, their increased comfort stems from these relationships extending beyond the school setting to their home neighbourhoods, thereby enhancing their familiarity with one another and overall time spent together. Additionally, Black youth derived a sense of connection and bonding from the sharing of mutual activities (e.g., sports), music, and forms of communication/ expression.

While participant youth identified that relational complications and challenges existed within their everyday friendships with their same race peers, they nonetheless emphasized their inclination to associate first with other Black peers/learners. In this regard, the youth conveyed their desire and need for increased opportunities and resources directed toward supporting regular interaction between Black students. Rather than having such groupings perceived by others as suspicious or threatening (HRSB, 2003), focus group youth expressed their need to be recognized and supported not only as individuals, but as an aggregate, drawn toward and benefiting from racial group association and shared activity.

Research Question #4:

Which, if any, significant figures (e.g., teachers, parents, coaches, clergy) do Black youth regard as key influences on their everyday friendships in the school and community?

Participant youth generally maintained that their friendship selections and experiences were largely independent of the particular opinions or wishes of significant adults in their lives, namely parents and teachers. While they were mindful of the opinions expressed by these important and influencing others toward their social and friendship relationships, they ultimately claimed the right and autonomy to pursue their self-chosen associations. Notwithstanding, the focus group youth felt quite strongly that teachers, in particular, were often unsupportive of Black learner friendships in the context of the everyday classroom and broader school environment, viewing such relationships as distracting and contrary to educational progress. As such, participant youth tended to perceive their teachers, as having both negative and undue influence over their school-based Black peer friendships within the school environment. In doing so, they clearly expressed a desire for respect and trust that their same race friendships, no more or less than friendship relationships between youth of any particular affiliation or association, do not inherently pose any particular challenge or difficulty for the teacher or classroom. Hence, focus group youth sought to emphasize the benefits, as earlier noted (see: Question # 2), of their same race school friendships, in terms of such issues as interest, motivation, and commitment to school.

Research Question #5:

What supports, resources, or educational practices would Black youth view as useful to themselves in terms of developing and maintaining supportive friendships in their school communities?

In keeping with Way et al. (2001), who reported that when students perceive their school environment to be supportive and respectful, they are more likely to make and maintain positive friendships, and Douvan (1983), who highlighted the school setting as highly conducive to the development of friendships, participant youth cited both positive current educational practices and offered suggestions they felt might foster and support the formation and maintenance of healthy school friendships among Black learners in school environments. Among these, youth agreed that having a friend in their classroom served as a support system, facilitating improved academic performance, particularly through collaboration on schoolwork. Accordingly, youth specifically suggested that it would be helpful if teachers communicated with students when organizing their classroom lists at the beginning of the school year to ensure that at least one friend is present in the same classroom. Other suggestions included providing school space for leisure, recreation, and social exchange between same race peers, and the organization by schools of such activities as sports (e.g., basketball, floor hockey), school trips, or peer helping programs to encourage and place same race friends in shared events.

According to the youth participants, supportive intraracial friendships provide psychological, social, and emotional benefits within their shared experiences at the junior high school level. More particularly, youth participants indicated the benefit and the need for additional occasions to socialize in school and to collaborate on school assignments in order to alleviate feelings of isolation and exclusion. Through their

comments, the focus group youth were clearly appealing for increased physical resources, programming, and opportunities to engage in spontaneous and planned groupings with their same race friends and peers. In this context, that is the minority status of the Black learner participants within the present study as they attend schools having predominately White student populations, the interviewed youth expressed deep and particular need for the positive recognition and support of their intraracial friendships within their respective school settings.

The following recommendations are accordingly suggested for schools, teachers, school psychologists, African Nova Scotian community programs, and future research, to enhance the development and maintenance of supportive interpersonal friendships among Black youth, and to serve as an asset to these youth within their school experiences as Black learners.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for Schools

- That schools give consideration to the allotment of space and resources (e.g., furnishings, computer, white board) for a Black student lounge open to all students, however, with particular attention to providing a supportive social and academic environment for Black youth. Such a common and friendly environment for Black and other youth might well significantly contribute to conditions and supports for the development of their friendships and social acquaintances with same race and other race peers.

- That schools endeavour to promote and help organize culturally related opportunities involving group activities and events within the school setting. For example, such involvements might include the formation of culturally related student societies, debating clubs, community volunteer groups, mentoring programs, and performing arts clubs.

- That schools work in cooperation (e.g. sharing of material, organization of workshops and seminars) with the African Canadian Services Division (ACSD) of Nova Scotia's Department of Education, Halifax Regional School Board's Race Relations, Cross Cultural Understanding & Human Rights Department (RCH), community based services (e.g., Black Educators Association (BEA)), and

provincial advisory councils (e.g., Council on African Canadian Education (CACE)) to facilitate broader cultural awareness for the staff and administration.

Recommendations for Teachers

- That teachers be better informed about the benefits of friendships to youth in their schooling, with particular awareness and sensitivity to those benefits offered Black learners, often the racial minority in the classroom and school environment. Such information and training could be obtained from available research, conveyed through presentations and workshops made available by school psychologists and others familiar with the topic area.

- That, given the academic benefit youth derive from collaboration when partnered with a friend, teachers might consider soliciting and implementing the opinions of the youth concerning the development of class lists and student seating arrangements prior to the start of the next academic year.

- That teachers endeavour to receive guidance from home through regular consultation with parents in order to apprise themselves of parental concerns regarding their child's education and to support his or her school adjustment, with particular mind toward recognizing and supporting social relationships and friendships among Black learners. The sharing of such information between parents and teachers could occur during parent/teacher meetings and/or mutual training workshops.

Recommendations for School Psychologists

- School psychologists, while restricted and limited by the amount of time allotted to each school on their circuit, may play a role in increasing the understanding of the vital role that friendships play in the daily lives and school experiences of youth. For example, school psychologists could provide information (e.g., professional development presentations, handouts) concerning the meaning, value, and benefits that quality friendships provide to youth in their overall educational experience.

- School psychologists could serve as consultants for teachers, guidance counsellors, and school administration concerning the development/enhancement of initiatives to support friendship relationships within the school setting.

- School psychologists could also facilitate groups with students who require social skills development in areas pertaining to friendship development (e.g., how to make appropriate introductions with peers, making friends) and maintenance (e.g., resolving conflict among friends, maintaining friendships).

Recommendations for African Nova Scotian Community Programs

- The development and provision of cultural awareness and educational programs that meaningfully draw from and are responsive to the issues and concerns of adolescent Black learners, related to their everyday friendship relationships. Such programs (e.g., mentoring program, peer support) might benefit from being conceptualized within an Africentric framework to be relevant and applicable to the culture/race related needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

- That Black community organizations (e.g., BEA), local libraries, recreation centres), and area schools, consider providing comfortable and accessible meeting space for Black youth who utilize their services and resources. Such social gathering places might well involve opportunities to share experiences in their daily lives and school, display various talents (e.g., spoken word, singing, musical instruments), and collaborate on schoolwork (e.g., practice presentations, work on school projects, complete homework). The lounge could also provide a place for invited mentors and role models from the Black community to speak to the youth in their own personal environment.

- The promotion of organized sport activities/teams (e.g., basketball), talent events (e.g., singing, dancing, acting), and excursions within the city and other communities (e.g., Black Cultural Centre, museums, theatres, university campus tours, beaches) might create opportunities for youth to develop new friendships or enhance existing friend relationships.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Given that the present study reflected only the perspectives of a relatively small number of Black youth from area junior high schools, the findings of the research might well be extended through the study of students within larger school populations and at various other levels of education (e.g., elementary and/ or high school).

- While Black male youth comprised approximately 42% of the total sample, only a small group of adolescent males were represented. Therefore, future research might increase the male sample size and provide for males to express their particular perspectives related to the topic of friendship.

- Future research might further address such critical factors identified in terms of friendship noted by the youth participants (e.g., classroom organization, school/grade level/summer break transitions, racial stereotypes pertaining to academic performance, peer isolation/exclusion based on race).

- Future research might look to elicit the perspective of educators (including staff and administration) and parents regarding the meaning and value of Black youth friendships as they pertain to their respective students and children.

- Further research may also be extended to locations beyond the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) involving students in more rural settings and other smaller

sized urban populations throughout the broader central region and the province of Nova Scotia.

- Follow up interviews with the Black youth who participated in the current study (conducted over time) could enhance the findings of the current research by providing a developmental perspective on the nature and role of friendships in the ongoing lives of the original Black learner participants.

LIMITATIONS of the RESEARCH

1. The research findings are limited to those opinions expressed by the Black youth who participated in the current study. The opinions therefore, do not represent the perspective of all Black learners who attend junior high schools within the Halifax Regional Municipality.

2. Given that focus group discussion may promote a higher degree of conformity and agreement among some participants who may otherwise (e.g., individual interview) express differing perspectives, the findings of the research must recognize the possibility of such group effect. On the other hand, the presence of familiar and friendly co-participants in a group seems to enhance relatedness to topic material and general willingness to contribute to the shared discussion.

3. While the sole male participant in the mixed gender group did not appear inhibited in his comments, the absence of other males may have influenced the nature and content of his particular remarks.

4. Given that the research was conducted during the summer break (July, August), the available pool of students was limited by their relative lack of availability due to other summer related activities and involvements.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Letter of Information to the Black Educators Association

Letter of Information to Youth (Participants)

Letter of Information to Parent/Guardian

Letter of Information to the Black Educators Association

Dear Colleagues:

I am a graduate student in the Master of Arts School Psychology program in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am proposing to conduct research for a study entitled, "Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth". This proposed research is part of the requirements for my Master of Arts School Psychology degree.

The purpose of this research is to provide African Nova Scotian youth with the opportunity to tell how their interpersonal relationships with friends influence their educational experiences. It is hoped that this research will serve as a beneficial contribution to the current research concerned with improving the quality of African Nova Scotian youths' educational experiences.

I am proposing to recruit approximately sixteen African Nova Scotian youth who attend junior high schools in the Halifax Regional Municipality (grades 7 to 9) with the assistance of Steve Benton, Halifax Regional Educator of the Black Educators Association. Upon agreeing to participate in the study, a consent form will be signed by the participant and his/her parent or guardian. I will provide Steve Benton with a letter of information to give to potential participants and their parents. Interested participants and their parents will contact Mr. Benton either in person or by telephone at 424-7036. Mr. Benton will forward the names and telephone numbers to the researcher who will directly contact the youth and their parents to discuss the possibility of participation in the study.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this research and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

I appreciate and look forward to your support for my research.

Sincerely,
Karrela Paris-Bonenfant
Graduate Student
Master of Arts School Psychology

Letter of Information to Youth (Participants)

Dear Youth,

My name is Karrela Paris-Bonenfant and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology program in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am proposing to conduct a supervised research study with approximately 16 African Nova Scotian youth who attend junior high schools in the Halifax Regional Municipality (grades 7-9). This proposed research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts School Psychology at Mount Saint Vincent University.

The purpose of this research is to provide African Nova Scotian youth with the opportunity to discuss how their friendships might influence their educational experiences. It is hoped that this research will serve as a beneficial contribution to the current research concerned with improving the quality of African Nova Scotian youths' educational experiences.

I would greatly appreciate hearing your perspectives concerning the above-mentioned topic. This will be accomplished by your voluntary participation in one group discussion that is anticipated to last between approximately one to one and a half hours. In addition, you might be asked to voluntarily participate in a follow-up interview (lasting approximately one hour). Your participation is voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In addition, confidentiality will be maintained with the use of a coding system to protect your identity. As well, the research materials (audio-tapes) will be safely stored and eventually disposed of following completion of the study.

If you choose to participate, you will be compensated ten dollars per hour ($10/hour). If interested, please submit your name in person or by telephone at 424-7036 to Steve Benton, Regional Educator for Halifax Region (Black Educators Association) and I will contact you to thoroughly explain the research purpose and process, and seek your informed consent.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

Thank you for your interest in this study and I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the possibility of your participation in this research.

Regards,

Karrela Paris-Bonenfant
Graduate Student
Master of Arts School Psychology

Letter of Information to Parent/Guardian

Dear Parent/Guardian,

My name is Karrela Paris-Bonenfant and I am a graduate student in the School Psychology program in the Faculty of Education at Mount Saint Vincent University. I am proposing to conduct a supervised research study with approximately 16 African Nova Scotian youth who attend junior highschool in the Halifax Regional Municipality (grades 7-9). This proposed research is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts School Psychology at Mount Saint Vincent University.

The purpose of this research is to provide African Nova Scotian youth with the opportunity to discuss how their friendships might influence their educational experiences. It is hoped that this research will serve as a beneficial contribution to the current research concerned with improving the quality of African Nova Scotian youths' educational experiences.

I would appreciate hearing your child's perspectives concerning the above-mentioned topic. This will be accomplished by his/her voluntary participation in one group discussion that is anticipated to last between approximately one and one and a half hours. In addition, he/she might be asked to voluntarily participate in an approximately hour long individual follow-up interview. His/her participation is voluntary and he/she may withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. In addition, your child's participation will be made confidential with the use of a coding system to conceal his/her identity. The research materials (audio-tapes) will be safely stored and eventually disposed of following completion of the study.

If you permit your child to participate, he/she will be compensated ten dollars per hour ($10/hour). If interested, please submit your name in person or by telephone at 424-7036 to Steve Benton, Regional Educator for Halifax Region (Black Educators Association) and I will contact you to thoroughly explain the research purpose and process, and seek your informed consent.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

Thank you for your interest in this study and I look forward to meeting with you to discuss the possibility of your child's participation in this research.

Regards,

Karrela Paris-Bonenfant
Graduate Student
Master of Arts School Psychology

Appendix B

Letters of Informed Consent for Interview (Youth)

Letters of Informed Consent for Interview (Parent/Guardian)

Letters of Informed Consent for Focus Group (Youth)

Letters of Informed Consent for Focus Group (Parent/Guardian)

Letters of Informed Consent for Interview (Youth)

I, _____, hereby agree to be a participant in the study entitled,

(Please print)

"Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth". The research purpose and process has been explained to me by the student researcher, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant.

I agree to Karrela Paris-Bonenfant conducting an individual interview with me in regard to the above-mentioned study. The duration of the interview will be approximately one and a half hours and will be audiotaped.

I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary and I do not have to answer questions that I do not want to, I am able to stop the interview entirely, and/or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I understand that confidentiality will be maintained by confidential coding assigned to establish anonymity whereby protecting my identity. I have been assured of the proper storage and eventual disposal of the research materials.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

I understand that by signing below that I have read the information provided above and agree to my participation in this research study.

Participant _____ *(please print)*

Signature _____

Researcher _____

Date _____

Note: A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

Letters of Informed Consent for Interview (Parent/Guardian)

I, _____, hereby agree to permit my child to be a
participant in the
               (Please print)
study entitled, *"Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova
Scotian Youth"*. The research purpose and process has been explained to me by the student
researcher, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant.

I agree to allow my child to be interviewed by Karrela Paris-Bonenfant in regard to the above-
mentioned study. I understand that the duration of the interview will be approximately one and a
half hours and will be audiotaped.

I understand that my child's participation in this research project is voluntary and he/she does not
have to answer questions that he/she does not want to, he/she is able to stop the interview
entirely, and/or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I understand that my child's confidentiality will be maintained by confidential coding assigned to
establish anonymity whereby protecting my child's identity. I have been assured of the proper
storage and eventual disposal of the research materials.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-
3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-
6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical
standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you
have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not
directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President
Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or
by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

I understand that by signing below that I have read the information provided above and agree to
my child's participation in this research study.

Parent/Guardian _____ (*please print*)

Signature   _____

Researcher   _____

Date   _____

Note: A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

Letters of Informed Consent for Focus Group (Youth)

I, _____, hereby agree to be a participant in the study
entitled,
                    (Please print)
"Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth".
The research purpose and process has been explained to me by the student researcher, Karrela
Paris-Bonenfant.

I agree to my participation in one group discussion in regard to the above-mentioned study. The
duration of the session will be approximately one and a half hours and will be audiotaped.

I understand that my participation in this research project is voluntary and I do not have to answer
questions that I do not want to, I am able to request the stopping of the audio-taping, and/or
withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I understand that confidentiality will be maintained by confidential coding assigned to establish
anonymity whereby protecting my identity. It will be requested of all participants to maintain
confidentiality concerning the information discussed among the group during the session. I have
been assured of the proper storage and eventual disposal of the research materials.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-
3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-
6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical
standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you
have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not
directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President
Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or
by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

I understand that by signing below that I have read the information provided above and agree to
my participation in this research study.

Participant _____ *(please print)*

Signature _____

Researcher _____

Date _____

Note: A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

Letters of Informed Consent for Focus Group (Parent/Guardian)

I, _____, hereby agree to allow my child to participate in the

(Please print)

study entitled, *"Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth"*. The research purpose and process has been explained to me by the student researcher, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant.

I agree to my child's participation in one group discussion in regard to the above-mentioned study. The duration of the session will be approximately one and a half hours and will be audiotaped.

I understand that my child's participation in this research project is voluntary and he/she does not have to answer questions that I he/she does not want to, he/she is able to request the stopping of the audio-taping, and/or withdraw from the study at any time without consequence.

I understand that my child's confidentiality will be maintained by confidential coding assigned to establish anonymity whereby protecting his/her identity. It will be requested of all participants to maintain confidentiality concerning the information discussed among the group during the session. I have been assured of the proper storage and eventual disposal of the research materials.

If you have any questions about this study, please contact me, Karrela Paris-Bonenfant, at 422-3726 (email: karrela@ns.sympatico.ca) or my thesis supervisor, Dr. Michael Fitzgerald, at 457-6382 (email: michael.fitzgerald@msvu.ca). This research activity has met the ethical standards of the University Research Ethics Board at Mount Saint Vincent University. If you have any questions or concerns about this study and wish to speak with someone who is not directly involved with this study, you may contact Dr. Anthony Davis, Associate Vice-President Research and Acting Chair of the University Research Ethics Board, by telephone at 457-6296 or by email at anthony.davis@msvu.ca.

I understand that by signing below that I have read the information provided above and agree to my child's participation in this research study.

Parent/Guardian _____ *(please print)*

Signature _____

Researcher _____

Date _____

Note: A copy of this consent form will be given to you.

Appendix C

Sample Focus Group and Interview Questions

Sample Focus Group and Interview Questions

1. From your perspective, when I say the word "friend", what words or ideas come to mind?

2. From your perspective, when I say the word "friendship", what words or ideas come to mind?

3. In your opinion, how, if at all, do your friendships differ from other relationships that you have (e.g., family, teachers, acquaintances, classmates, peers)?

4. In your experience, where have you been likely to find friends or form friendships (e.g., school, neighbourhood, community)?

5. In your experience, what difficulties, if any, have you encountered in making friends in school? If so, have you encountered the same difficulties outside of school?

6. In your opinion, how, if at all, do others influence your choice of school-based friends (e.g., parents, teachers, peers, other friends)?

7. In your opinion, which, if any, certain human features (e.g., age, race, gender) influence your choice of friends?

8. In your perception, how, if at all, are "best friends" different from your other friends?

9. In your perspective, which, if any, particular friends play a greater role in your daily experiences at school? If so, what are some of their characteristics?

10. From your perspective, what are the differences, if any, between your same race friendships and your friendships with youth from other ethnic backgrounds and affiliations?

11. In your opinion, in what way, might your friends influence your decision to participate in academically oriented social clubs, or extracurricular activities?

12. In your opinion, what role, if any, might individuals (e.g., peers, teachers, administration) play in promoting the development of friendships in the school setting?

13. From your perspective, if you were provided the opportunity to develop activities, programs, or other initiatives that serve to support friendship development in school, what might they be?

Appendix D

Demographic Survey

Demographic Survey

Please complete the following questions. Your responses will remain confidential.

Name: Age:

School Name: Phone#:

                                                              Grade:

Are you African (Black) Nova Scotian: ☐ Yes   ☐ No   Gender: Male ☐ or Female ☐

What term do you use to refer to your ethnic
identity?_____

Are you biracial? (e.g., White/Black)? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Were you born in Nova Scotia? If not, how long have you lived here?

The students in your school are mainly: White ☐   Black ☐   various ethnic backgrounds☐

Which age group do your friends mainly belong to? ☐Under 11   ☐11-13   ☐14-16   ☐over 16

Do you have a best friend? ☐ Yes   ☐ No   If yes, what is the ethnicity of your best friend?
☐ Black   ☐White   ☐Other (please specify)_____

Does your best friend attend the same school? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, are they in any of your classes? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Your group of friends are mainly: Male   ☐ female ☐ male and female ☐

Do the majority of your friends attend the same school? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

Where are you most likely to make new friends? ☐Community programs   ☐ Neighbourhood   ☐
Church   ☐Other

Do you have the same friend (group of friends) from elementary school? ☐ Yes ☐ No (If No, in the space provide, briefly explain why not?)

Has it been, more difficult ☐ easier ☐ or the same ☐ for you to make friends in junior highschool?

If you answered that it has been more difficult for you to make friends in junior highschool, in the space provided, can you please briefly explain what you think the reason for such difficulty might be?

Do your friends influence your decision to participate in school activities (ie, academic activities, sports, clubs, student council)? ☐ Yes ☐ No

To whom do you go to first for support when you have a problem? ☐Friend ☐ Parent ☐Other

To whom do you go to first when something good happens to you? ☐Friend ☐Parent ☐Other

How important is it to have friends in school? ☐Not important ☐somewhat important ☐important

☐Extremely important ☐ Doesn't matter to me at all

Appendix E

Group Confidentiality Agreement

Group Confidentiality Agreement

This form is intended to further establish confidentiality of data obtained during the course of the study entitled, *"Adolescent Friendships and School Experiences: Perspectives of African Nova Scotian Youth"*. All parties involved in this research, including all focus group members, will be asked to read the following statement and sign their names indicating that they agree to comply.

I hereby affirm that I will not communicate, or in any manner disclose publicly, information discussed during the course of this focus group interview. I agree not to talk about material relating to this study or interview with anyone outside of my fellow focus group members and the researcher.

Participant: _____*(please print)*

Signature: _____

Researcher: _____

Date: _____

Note: A copy of this form will be given to you.

Appendix F

The Black Educators Association

The Black Educators Association

The BEA is a non-profit organization that has been in operation since 1969. Since its inception, the BEA has been instrumental in assisting African Nova Scotians in attaining equality within the education system in Nova Scotia (BEA, 2005a). The BEA has a role that encompasses community, educational, and professional development. In fulfilling this significant role, the BEA works in conjunction with educational organizations that includes, but not limited to, the Department of Education, the African Canadian Services Division, community groups, parent associations, and school boards (BEA, 2005a).

The Regional Educators Program was formed in 1991 to assist the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) in meeting its mandate to report on education and offer community initiatives to benefit Black Learners in Nova Scotia (BEA, 2005b). The Regional Educators program has continued since 1995 under BEA's management, as a recommendation stemming from the BLAC report (1994) (BEA, 2005b). The Regional Educators work in specific regions within Nova Scotia. Their role is to develop and oversee community initiatives and to liaise with the education system to improve the educational experience of Black learners. In doing so, they assist students, conduct workshops for parents and teachers, oversee tutoring programs, and develop policies pertaining to race relations and issues concerning Black learners, and other similar initiatives and responsibilities (BEA, 2005b). The Halifax Regional Educator is the person responsible for the schools located in Halifax /Halifax County. The following is a list of other areas in Nova Scotia in which the Regional Educators work:

- Dartmouth/Eastern Halifax County,
- Colchester, Cumberland and Pictou Counties,

- Antigonish and Guysborough Counties,
- Annapolis, Hants, Kings and Lunenburg Counties,
- Yarmouth, Digby, Queens, and Shelburne,
- All counties in Cape Breton (source: http://bea.eastlink.ca/

FIGURES

Figure1

Participants' Profiles

Participants' Profiles

Age
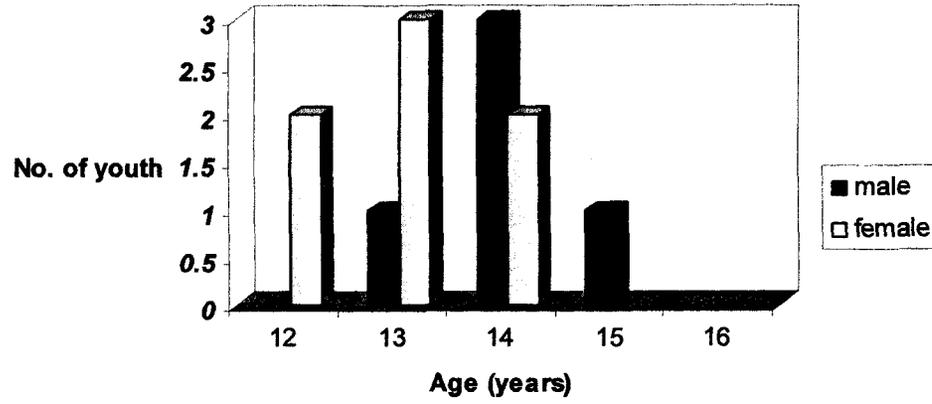
Grade Level
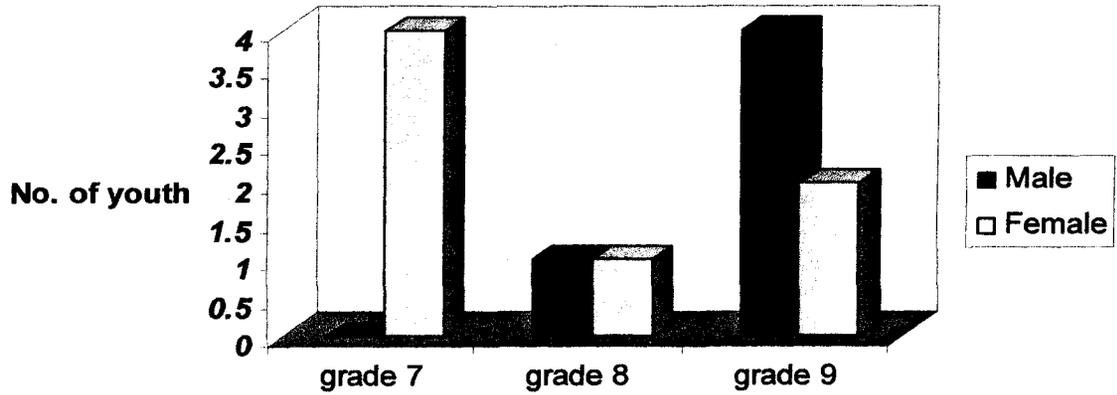
Participants' Profiles

# Racial Makeup of Participants' Schools
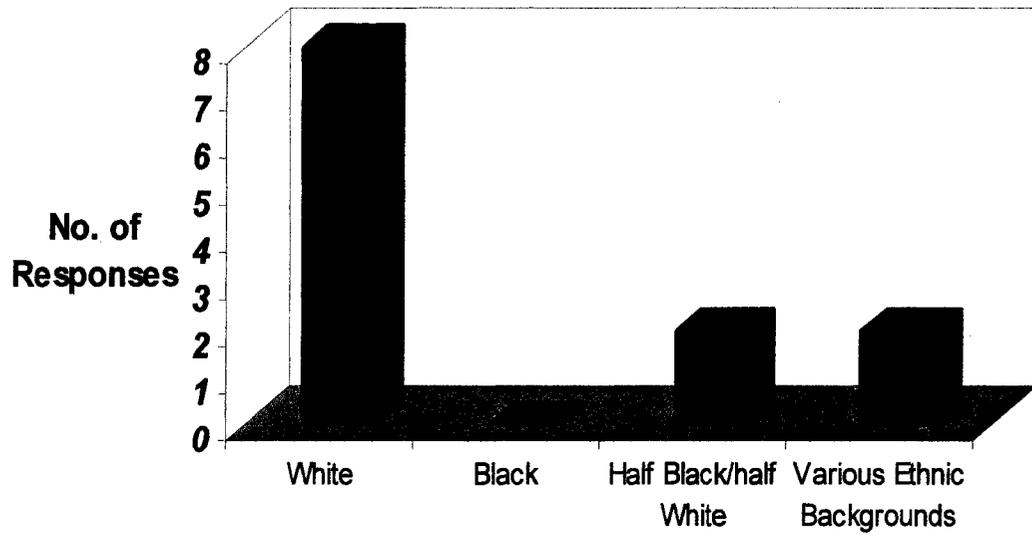
Figure 2

Participants' Friendship Profiles

Participants' Friendship Profiles
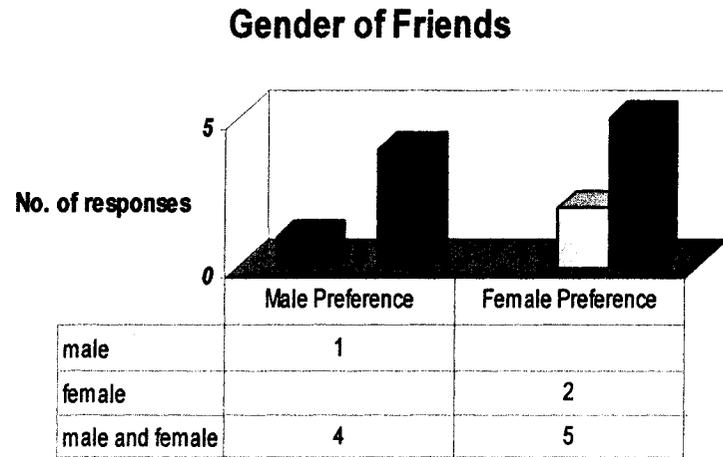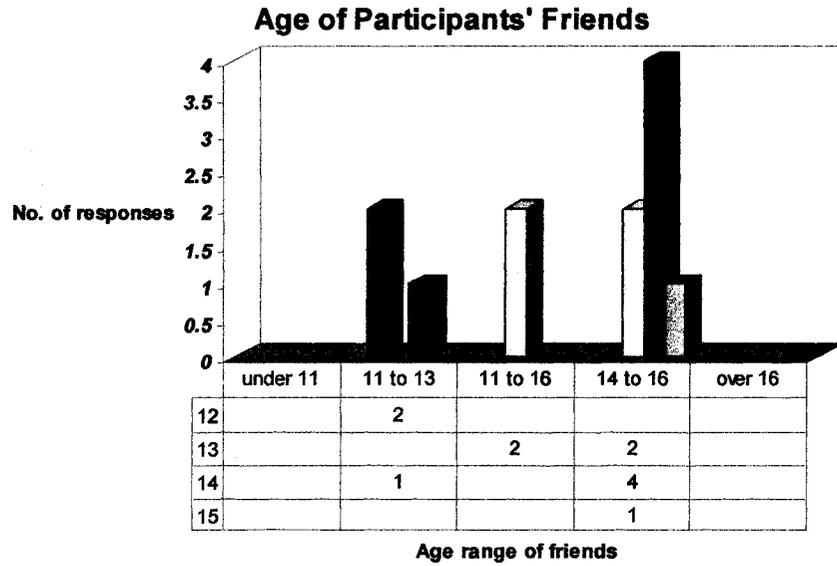
Age of Participants' Friends

No. of responses	under 11	11 to 13	11 to 16	14 to 16	over 16
12		2			
13			2	2	
14		1		4	
15				1	

Age range of friends

Gender of Friends

No. of responses	Male Preference	Female Preference
male	1	
female		2
male and female	4	5

Participants' Friendship Profiles

Best Friend Profile

No. of responses

Have a best friend

Best friend attends same school

Best friend in the same class

Best friend is same race

■ Yes
□ No

Sites to Find Friends

No. of responses

communtiy programs neighbourhood church other

Participants' Friendship Profiles

majority of friends attend same school

No
No. of responses: 4.5

No. of responses: 7.5

Yes
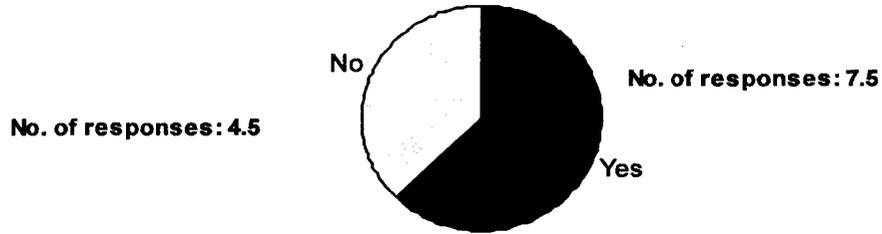
Maintained Friendships from Elementary School

No. of responses

■ Yes
□ No

Male   Female
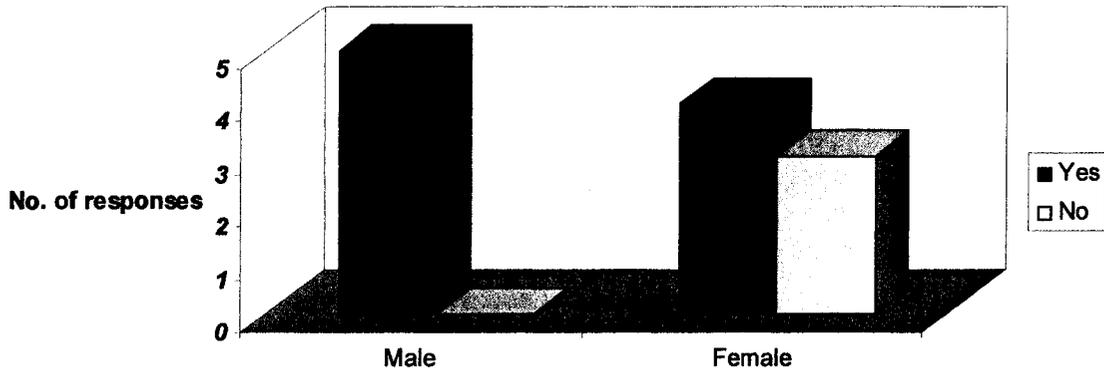
Participants' Friendship Profiles

Level of Difficulty Making Friends in Junior High School

	Male	Female
☐ More Difficult	0	0
■ Easier	2	1
■ The Same	3	6

No. of responses
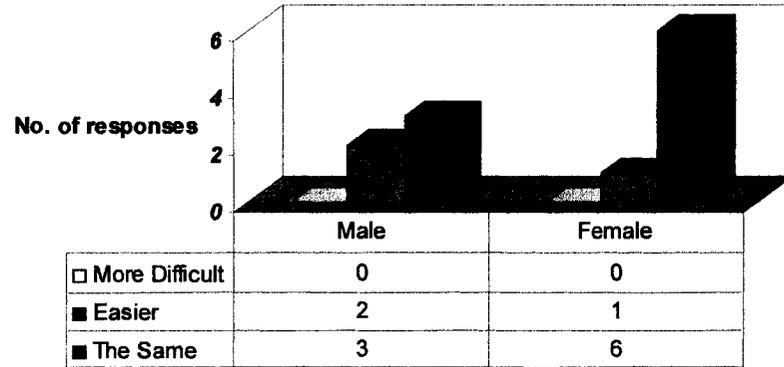
Importance of Friends in School

No. of responses

Not Important | Somewhat Important | Important | Exremeley Important | Doesn't matter to me at all

■ Male
☐ Female
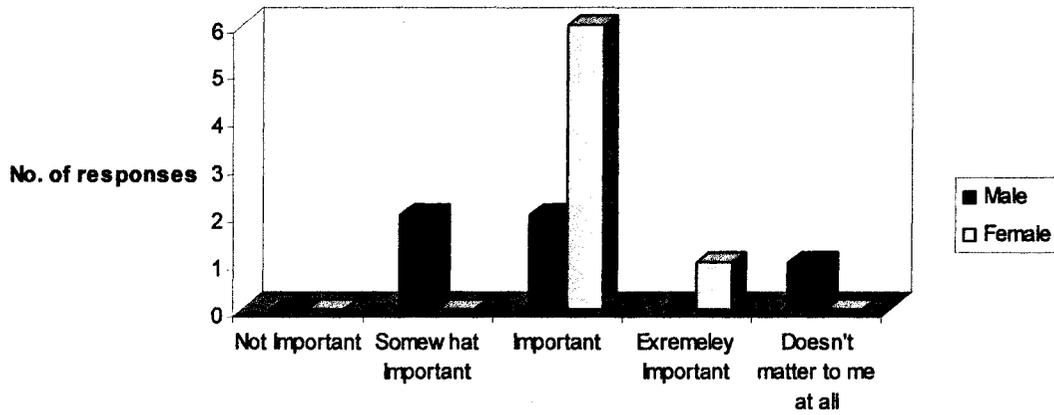
Figure 3

Selected Sample of Coding

Selected Sample of Coding

1st Level	2nd Level	3rd Level	Category

- family
- teachers
- respect for parent as an influence on friendship selection
- colour as a stereotype for academic status
- teachers as not having an influence on friends
- peers as not having an influence on friends
- friends as not a forced relationship

Influences on friend selection

- appearance as a criterion of friendship selection
- colour as a barrier to friendship selection in school setting
- age/maturity as a criterion for friendship selection
- younger/immature friends as untrustworthy

- friends as mixed gender
- colour as not important to friend selection
- groups of friends as having different characteristics
- good academic work ethic as a criterion for friend selection in school
- academic status as a criterion for friend selection in school
- compatibility
- length of time knowing the person as a criterion for friendship
- similar behaviour as a criterion for friend selection
- race as a criterion
- gender as not important

Friendship Selection criteria

Friendship Selection Elements

Friendship Formation & Development