

dreams, celebrating their achievements and helping them correct their errors, loving and respecting them, balancing the scales for them, and offering them keys to doors that are often or otherwise locked.

Mentoring Young Men of Color communicates the practice of mentoring as curriculum in a broad sense. Distinct from the often prescriptive and narrow layout of academic goals and objectives, the viewpoints expressed here seek to address the often misunderstood lives of young males of color and the methods that we can use to assist them, in and outside of the school setting.

In the next chapter, I undertake a brief discussion of adolescent development as it plays out in the in-school experiences of males of color. In looking at their school lives, I also present three common obstacles that they face in this setting. I go on to present the concept of the *Act of Removal*. Essentially, it is a method of creating liberating and democratic learning environments where students have an active voice. Understanding how the *Act of Removal* functions in educational institutions can make all the difference in establishing successful SBM programs, as well as building positive teaching and learning environments. The ideas presented in chapter 2 mainly address mentoring within the school setting.

2

Embracing Young Males of Color in the School Domain

The road to freedom is paved with education.

It is the Blackest thing that you can do.

—Frederick Douglass

Adolescence marks a decisively pivotal time in human development. During these years, young people (ages 13–18) are experiencing multidimensional growth on various levels: intellectual, physical, social, moral, intrapersonal, and spiritual. This developmental stage finds adolescents engaged in both a conscious and unconscious search for an autonomous identity (i.e., a social role in life). It is the kind of search that is considerably influenced by peers and adults whose interactions and feedback assist adolescents in clarifying, as well as forming judgments about, the world around them. Here, the adolescent identity is partly constructed by sharing perspectives and personal experiences with others.

Outside of their social relationships, adolescents are also impacted by internal forces such as puberty, egocentrism, sexual orientation and confusion, insecurity, disillusionment, and depression. Within the matrix of these inner and outer dynamics, youth shape an image of themselves that can extend well into their adulthood. Specifically, for males of color, adolescence is burdened by such factors as hypermasculinity, racial awareness in a predominantly White society, negative

imagery tied to minority status, and social labeling and mistreatment—all of which serve as high hurdles in understanding the Self. Consequently, the manifestation of these complexities can be seen in boys' low academic achievement, delinquency, substance abuse, premature sexual activity, alienation, and acts of aggression and violence toward others.

Within the educational setting there exists a lived reality among males of color that is widely foreign among teachers and school administrators. In the primary grades, schools are initially regarded by these boys as safe and pleasant spaces for play, success, and fair gain. Yet, as they progress into early adolescence they begin to view schools as being no different than any other social institution that maligns and devalues their culture and existence. Indeed, by the time these young men are well into their teens they have already come to see schools as sites of intolerance, oppression, and dehumanization. It is this perception that pushes many of them to disconnect from classroom learning experiences, as well as disidentify with formal education on the whole.

Academic failure and disidentification for males of color is a consequence of three overarching factors. The first relates to present-day classroom curriculum. As the adolescent male of color seeks out his social role, he finds no clue of it in textbooks or classroom activities that largely reflect Eurocentric frameworks and perspectives. From social studies to the sciences, and from language arts to mathematics, much of the curriculum that students of color are exposed to is short of cultural representation and social relevancy. Teacher lesson plans that coincide with required textbooks either minimize cultural aspects of Latino and African American students or omit them altogether.

Students of color bring different histories and values into the classroom. As such, they must be presented with a curriculum that is rich in cultural images and that helps them affirm and celebrate their educational experience. The added dimensions of social and cultural relevancy within a school curriculum can assist students of color in making connections between what they are learning in school and its utility in their out-of-school lives. Without seeing this vital correlation, students

of color will continue to resist the educative process, acting out in classrooms and wondering: "Where is my culture in this activity?" and "What does this lesson have to do with my life?"

With the above query in mind, teachers must strive to incorporate into their pedagogy the kind of curriculum that genuinely addresses student cultural values, beliefs, and norms. One significant resource to assist teachers in structuring lesson plans that highlight social and cultural concepts is the students themselves. By simply talking with each other, teachers and students can bring to the surface what attracts and excites and what bores and repels learners from learning.

Through open and honest dialogue, educators place themselves in the position of becoming more aware of the complex identities that each student possesses. With this newer knowledge, teachers not only learn how to reach students on a cognitive level but also how to connect with them on an affective one. Ideally, curriculum shifts from being Eurocentric to multicultural, from rigid to flexible, from mechanical to humanistic, and from isolating to embracing.

The second factor associated with academic failure and disidentification among males of color is the negative treatment that they encounter in schools and classrooms. If these boys walk, talk, or act in any manner contrary to school disciplinary codes, they are reprimanded without counsel, advocacy, or compassion. It is in this cold and unfeeling environment that boys begin to make out the unspoken agenda of schools—to silence and regulate their young lives. As school officials uphold callous, zero tolerance measures, they—unknowingly or not—foster much of the educational apathy and resistance that we are currently witnessing amid Latino and African American males.

When students of color are perceived as being "aggressive," "loud," or "out of control," on the surface we see it as a behavioral problem—something corrected through rules and regulation. But this typical response often stems from the fact that school faculty and staff do not have a firm understanding of students' physical development or cultural norms. As stated, adolescence is a period of tremendous physical growth. Young people are literally developing right in front of our eyes.

Because of the amount of growth occurring during this time, many students, particularly boys, find it extremely difficult to sit still, much less concentrate on a teacher's lesson. Young people desire movement. Yet, if they act on that impulse, they realize that they may be subjected to swift and harsh punishment. Invariably, at some point their desire will override their awareness of potential consequences, and the risk of moving or in some way expressing themselves will be taken.

Discipline problems often stem from how male student actions are perceived by teachers, usually female teachers. Boys, as compared to their female counterparts, are often stereotyped as being less thoughtful, less sensitive, less quiet, and less cooperative. When the constructions of race and class are added to gender, knowledge or ignorance of cultural norms plays a growing role in how we see and experience males of color.

There frequently exists among female teachers a kind of tension, confusion, or, sometimes, contempt for the social and cultural norms of males of color. Some White teachers, and even teachers of color from a higher socioeconomic status, tend to misinterpret or have little tolerance for the behaviors of Latino and African American students. Accordingly, they impose sanctions more regularly and more cruelly on these young people, leading to greater conflict and disidentification with their schooling.

This is not to say that female teachers, White or otherwise, cannot reliably teach nor have a profound effect on male students of color. Rather, it is to say that not knowing, understanding, and adequately addressing male student needs and behaviors generally results in their negative treatment. Not knowing their neighborhoods, what they face at home and in the streets, incredibly limits perception and understanding. With the lack of effort to be more sensitive and aware, teachers, both female and male, focus more on acquiescence and control.

When teachers fail to understand a student's ethnic experience or their acts of resistance to conformity, they then form negative perceptions of their students, seeing only audacity and disobedience. Associ-

ated with teacher negative attitudes and expectations is the student's internalization of these perceptions and their adaptation to them. Many students absorb negative teacher impressions, which can have adverse effects on their behavior, self-esteem, self-concept, and academic success.

In part, males of color suffer failure in schools and classrooms because the way they look, behave, speak, and learn is seen as divergent from what is deemed "normal." Boys then internalize these outward perceptions and perpetuate self-defeating behaviors both in and out of school. Sadly, their parents lose hope and wash their hands of them and teachers conveniently get rid of them through suspension, expulsion, and special education referrals.

In short, cultural perceptions guide the hand of disciplinary action. If we are adverse to a certain behavior, we often seek to control its occurrence through punishment and sanction. In the school setting, this translates into the controlling of student bodies through suspension and expulsion. The trouble with such measures is that they fail to take into account a student's cultural, emotional, or psychological outlook, which is most likely the source of the behavior. The major fault in school suspension and expulsion is that it merely removes the body from sight. It does not address the student's feelings, issues, or concerns. Thus, the problem, having never been dealt with appropriately, will only resurface with quite possibly greater impact and harsher restraint.

Like the structural disadvantages found within the larger society (discussed in the prologue), schools, unknowingly or not, construct barriers that discourage, demotivate, and disempower young males of color vis-à-vis curriculum and discipline. Just as these students are aware of the out-of-school barriers that exist, they are also cognizant of day-to-day in-school ones. The school building and virtually everything within it represents some form of barrier. Boys of color see barriers in their watered-down curriculum, their dead-end courses, and their biased achievement tests; they feel them in teachers' low expectations

and the “discipline and punish” codes of their school; they wear them as drab, monochromatic school uniforms; and they hear them in classrooms where their cultural tongue remains undervalued and silenced.

One way or another, all students rebel against in-school barriers, particularly if they are sensitive to the effects. For males of color, rebellion can become routine in an environment where curriculum lacks cultural representations and where an excess of physical restrictions abound. Certainly, it is not difficult to understand their reactions to schooling given the conditions that these young men are subjected to on a daily basis. Yet despite the stark institutional realities that they face, there exists a third and final barrier that heightens academic failure and resistance among young males of color. It is an obstacle that they themselves construct and participate in to the detriment of their own personal development and success. In the following section, I offer a discussion on what is called the “Blame Game.”

THE BLAME GAME: PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY UNACCOUNTED FOR

When discussing social and political inequities with adolescent males of color, the overall sentiment they share is that they are victims of prejudice and discrimination. In many instances they perceive teachers, administrators, and policemen as a combined enemy—a singular force whose objective is to silence their individual expression and prevent them from achieving their self-defined “American Dream.” The more these students encounter authoritarian teachers, as well as policies and procedures that regulate their existence, the more schools become part and parcel to a discriminatory experience. Schools begin to reflect the larger society, and these young men come to see both settings as cold, unwelcoming, and biased.

So how do males of color react to institutional racism? How do they deal with their victimization? In response to many of the in-school injustices that they face, these students tend to use oppositional methods that ironically mirror their own oppression. For example, when they suffer verbal discipline from school staff, males will retort with

their own curse words and threats; when they feel overlooked by teachers, they will ignore classroom lessons or leave work uncompleted; when they feel unwanted or alienated by the school at large, they will in turn disconnect, disengage, and ultimately drop out.

In their attempt to challenge the in-school barriers that stifle their identity and ways of being, males of color simultaneously construct another obstacle that further impedes their social and academic success. It is an obstacle that faults teachers and other institutional agents for students’ lack of achievement, while never once recognizing how students themselves are complicit in their own personal and collective failures. This is called the “Blame Game”—it is a long, drawn-out contest of finger-pointing.

As a social phenomenon, the Blame Game is nothing new. Our society has engaged in it for some time. The objective of the game is to remove oneself from all personal accountability. Whatever failures or setbacks one encounters, the burden must be shifted away from the individual and placed onto someone else. Everyone has played this game. We have all pointed fingers. Perhaps we have pointed at politicians and their policy decisions or toward an educator and his or her approach to teaching or at a parent and his or her method of child rearing and supervision. In whatever direction we have pointed our fingers, rarely have we included ourselves in that scope.

Undeniably, we have all joined in on the Blame Game. Yet while we play, we inadvertently teach young people this diversionary tactic. We show them that it is much easier to believe that someone else is responsible for their losses without demonstrating to them how to overcome their defeats. They then take our lessons into schools and reproduce them. They come to realize that if they do not do well in school, then it is obvious who must be to blame—the teacher. Indeed, this is the main problem with the Blame Game. It does not force us to look critically at ourselves. It does not ask us to make personal changes within our lives or to work collectively toward social reform. Instead, we condemn others for our individual mistakes as well as those errors that occur on a larger social scale.

As a response to their everyday oppressive circumstances, young males of color are angry. In many respects, we have entitled them to feel this way. We have given them license to abhor society and themselves because we have not provided them with the necessary tools to move beyond the Blame Game. These males require our assistance in redirecting their power, confronting their pain, transcending their rage, and organizing themselves to create a better, more constructive way of being. This is called personal agency; it runs contrary to blame. As opposed to performing random acts of self-destruction, these young men should be supported in building a healthy mind, body, and spirit. Further, by presenting them with alternative modes of teaching and learning, they can cease blaming another for their lack of academic achievement and take control of their own educational destiny.

The next section looks at the role that mentors and teachers must first be willing to play in order to foster personal agency within males of color. It involves shifting from the traditional authoritarian directives that have become common in our educative practices. I informally call this shift the *Act of Removal*. Inspired by the works of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, it is an educational tool that can be used to assist students and educators in overcoming the powerlessness that the Blame Game embodies. While schools have historically and presently been sites of assimilation and control, the Act of Removal holds the potential for turning learning environments into democratically safe spaces of academic freedom and emotional release.

THE ACT OF REMOVAL

It is ironic that in American society we advance democratic ideals, while in our schools and classrooms we promote dictatorships. In over 150 years of institutional education, teachers still situate themselves as the all-knowing and all-powerful figure in the classroom. From years of working in public schools, as both a teacher and a mentor, I am well aware of the power that teachers possess as the authority figure. While we can be attentive, caring, sensitive, and loving practitioners, we can also be strict, judgmental, cruel, and controlling autocrats.

While it is sometimes easy for us to confuse authority with omnipo-

tence, we must try to break away from the “my way or the highway” mentality that is pervasive in teaching and instruction. Instead, we must make the attempt to subordinate ourselves and come to see schools and classrooms as ethical sites, where students can be the creators of their own learning experience and teachers can be the facilitators of that knowledge. This is the Act of Removal. It is a process whereby classrooms become less dominated by adult authority and more youth-centered and focused. The objective is to construct learning environments that foster youth empowerment, free expression, self-discipline, and self-respect. With these notions in the forefront of our educative practices, student resistance to classroom learning can be minimized.

In carrying out the Act of Removal, teachers must first be conscious of how the misuse of their authoritarian power can negatively impact classroom learning and student life. Once teachers are aware of this, the Act of Removal asks them to take a risk—that is, to share this power with student participants. In short, learning becomes a partnership. This type of approach has been mirrored in the use of teacher–student contracts, where attendance policies, in-class activities, assessments, and other conventional practices are agreed upon jointly. For example, teachers may present various topics within a specific discipline, but dialogue with students about multiple ways of exploring it. As opposed to laying out a forced lesson plan or set of classroom rules, students and teachers approach everything as a collaborative endeavor. All voices are heard and validated in decision-making processes.

In spite of the power sharing that occurs during the Act of Removal, it is still essential for teachers to remain the classroom authority figure for it is the teacher who maintains a consistently safe and organized learning environment. Hence, subordinating oneself should be done inasmuch as is reasonable for producing and sustaining a secure classroom setting. This means instinctually and experientially knowing how much power to share with students based on their reaction to, and responsibility of, being a power holder and sharer. Without question, teachers must take baby steps as they employ the Act.

In some instances, the Act of Removal can be a cultural shock for

teachers and students, particularly in schools where class culture and student life are so incredibly rigid and defined. In my own teaching practices, young folks have responded to the Act of Removal in three general ways: (1) they do not see the Act as an opportunity to express critical thought and voice, and thus squander it by continually looking to me as the absolute authority figure; (2) they abuse their power and misuse the opportunity for constructive voice and action by disrespecting other students and myself; or (3) at some point they come to recognize the power being shared with them and use it as an asset to enhance their overall schooling experience.

Of course, the above reactions are contingent upon each student's disposition. For example, some years ago I taught a seventh-grade class. As a social studies activity, I asked students to collectively develop a list of problematic school-related issues. Their rather extensive listing included the following: school uniforms, cafeteria food, limited field trips, and inadequate school space. They were then asked if they wanted to inform the school's administration and Parent-Teachers Association of these concerns. All students were in agreement. With that in mind, they had the option of remaining anonymous—a majority did not.

Next, they were to think of various ways to express themselves. At this point, a small portion of student involvement declined. Although a large part of the class took on leadership roles in developing videos, audio recordings, and petitions, a minority abandoned their projects altogether, opting to disrespect their peers by engaging in name-calling and clowning around during audio and video recordings. In this instance, my role as the authority figure found me maintaining a safe space by talking one-on-one with those students who were disruptive. I either asked them to think of other ways to express their issues or to engage in a completely separate activity of their choice. They were split in the decision.

Despite varying student responses to the Act of Removal, bringing genuine democracy into classrooms affords young people the chance to speak their voice (even in their own vernacular); make choices based on their own perspective, culture, and experience; and challenge authority (which includes dominant ideologies) without fear of being reprimanded.

manded. As for teachers, theoretically they become more flexible and open to various student ideas. With these outcomes in mind, schools and classrooms can ideally become more welcoming, less restrictive, and less suffocating environments for all participants.

The Act of Removal helps educators become less dictatorial in their teaching role and more like partners in the learning experience. When teachers remove themselves from the authoritarian role that their position assumes, students can then learn to become stakeholders in their own education. As stakeholders, students learn to be more proactive in their learning and less reactive (i.e., the Blame Game). As for the educational setting, it becomes more personal and less callous. Students and teachers come to see each other as fully human, presenting one another with the opportunity to develop meaningful and long-lasting relationships.

Just as the Act of Removal asks teachers to create a leveled playing field within the learning environment, the same goes for school-based mentors. When mentoring in the classroom, it is important for mentors to take a step back every now and then, close their mouths, and open their ears to the range of thoughts and feelings being expressed by their mentees. Often mentors, like teachers, feel the need to stand in front of classrooms and preach to students about the dos and don'ts of life—a sort of one-way conversation where students wind up tuning out and turning off.

As opposed to sermonizing to young folks, we need to place their needs, their issues, and their voices at the center of mentoring sessions. We must remember that embracing environments cannot be created through one-way conversations. School-based mentoring must meet young people where they are emotionally and psychologically by providing them with a time and a space to articulate their lives, as well as the opportunity to release any repressed emotions. After listening to what they have to say, mentors may then step in and assist mentees in navigating their expressed issues. Mentoring of this nature is far more attractive to young people than that which lectures, moralizes, or attempts to “fix” them.

Helping students disclose their inner thoughts and emotions may

require that mentors do the same. Young people need to know that the road to adulthood is difficult for everyone, and that it does not necessarily lead to perfection. Indeed, the mentor is very much human and subject to error. Revealing oneself can be a risk—the kind of risk that the Act of Removal entails. In the context of mentoring and teaching, it means showing our humanity—warts and all.

One way to make our humanity known is by telling students some of our own personal stories. This includes our failures, as well as our accomplishments. Personal stories hold the potential for connecting with students on deeper levels. As we open up and disclose ourselves to them, they are more easily able to relate to us and see that we share many of the same traits and qualities as they do. The information that we provide might even serve as a life lesson for them to learn from.

Some of the personal stories that I have shared with my own mentees have ranged from run-ins with the police as a teenager to my near dropout from high school and from my graduation from college to the present struggles that I face as an adult. By talking about my everyday triumphs and defeats, some of my mentees are able to see themselves in me and connect on a more humanistic level. From this, we are able to further extend our lines of communication and continue to build meaningful relationships based on honesty, trust, and mutual respect.

The Act of Removal gives mentors and educators the chance to transform hierarchical classrooms and relationships into equitable learning communities, where youth and adults are positioned laterally. This form of humanism is reliant upon all participants recognizing and accepting each other's respective roles, identities, and voices. In the next chapter, I address more specifically the space that young males of color need to have in order to excel in the school environment. This space not only incorporates the Act of Removal but also other components and classroom techniques that serve to enrich the schooling experience for young males of color.