



My Brother's Keeper: Nurturing In-School Relationships for Young Men of Color in New York City

PAUL FORBES AND SARAH KLEVAN

A program centered around the concept of Umoja (“unity”) highlights the importance of positive in-school relationships for young men of color and describes how those relationships help them to succeed in school and deal with trauma in their lives.

On Saturday, October 15, 2016, Joseph Jimenez [JJ] was shot and killed on his way to his girlfriend’s house after a long day of work as a line cook at Applebee’s. Standing at 6 feet 2 inches, with a swaggering and loping gait, our young King¹ took four bullets to the head in a case of mistaken identity.

For many, JJ’s death was merely another nameless tally mark, another murder statistic that people will

¹ For more about the use of the term “Kings” for young African American men, see “Lifting Up Our Kings: Developing Black Males in a Positive and Safe Space” in *VUE* no. 42 at <http://vue.annenberginstitute.org/issues/42>.

Paul Forbes is the senior director of the Expanded Success Initiative at the Office of Equity and Access, New York City Department of Education. Sarah Klevan is a research analyst at the Research Alliance for New York City Schools and a doctoral candidate at New York University.

discuss as “very tragic.” For us, this particular tragedy involved one of our own young men, a student full of promise whom we had raised in our school community since he was ten years old and carried in our arms when his own best friend died in middle school.

– Excerpt from a memoriam written by UMOJA faculty leader Ingrid Chung

J’s death is an example of the heavy price that Black and Latino men pay for the structural inequities they face, such as higher rates of poverty, incarceration, and unemployment. New York City’s Young Men’s Initiative, a combination of new programs and policy reforms, seeks to mitigate some of the effects of these inequitable conditions on young men of color.

The educational component of this initiative, the Expanded Success Initiative (ESI), developed by the New York City Department of Education (DOE), focused specifically on improving college and career readiness among Black and Latino male youth. Over four years, the DOE provided funding and other resources to forty high schools to develop programming in three key domains: college-going culture, youth development, and academics. Schools were given substantial flexibility in how they would implement programming within the three domains.

In this short piece, we focus on the most common change that schools reported as a result of implementing ESI: improved in-school relationships. We draw upon findings from the Research Alliance for New York City

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2 For more information, see http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/research_alliance/research/projects/esi_evaluation.

School’s evaluation of the initiative² to discuss the importance and impact of these relationships.

THE IMPORTANCE OF IN-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIPS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Positive in-school relationships, including those between students and staff and between students and their peers, contribute to overall success in school. For example, positive relationships between peers have been linked to improved student behavior, prevention of school dropout, and increased college going (Wells et al. 2011; Riegler-Crumb 2010; Haynie & Osgood 2005). Researchers have also found a significant association between the quality of student-teacher relationships and a range of positive student outcomes, including engagement in learning, academic expectations, and college enrollment (Hallinan 2008; Wells et al., 2011; Riegler-Crumb 2010).

Nurturing relationships may be particularly important for supporting male students. Research has indicated that generally, girls have closer relationships with their teachers and more academically oriented relationships with their peers than boys do (DiPrete & Buchmann 2013; Giordano 2003; Riegler-Crumb 2010; Wells et al. 2011; Hughes, Cavell & Wilson 2001). Furthermore, research on schools that achieve positive outcomes for Black and Latino males suggests that strong relationships between teachers and students are a crucial element of their success (Fergus, Noguera & Martin 2014).

A majority of ESI schools incorporated programming that emphasized the development of in-school relationships. For example, approximately half of the ESI schools implemented mentoring programs (either adult-student mentoring or peer mentoring) and over a quarter

of ESI schools implemented advisory programs (small classes in which students are able to openly discuss non-school issues in their lives). Additional programs aimed at building relationships were used in smaller numbers of ESI schools; these included visits to students' homes, field trips that incorporated rope courses and group challenges, and enrichment activities that allowed students and staff to spend time together outside of classroom settings.

About a quarter of ESI schools sought to nurture relationships by creating single-gender spaces. These spaces were designed to help students develop their leadership skills and to provide a forum for discussing issues of particular relevance to them, such as interacting with police and other authority figures, sexual health, and romantic relationships.

THE UMOJA PROGRAM: LIFTING UP THE LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF YOUNG MEN OF COLOR

One such program is UMOJA, referenced in the quote at the beginning of this article. UMOJA (Swahili for “unity”), is a male-empowerment program developed at the Urban Assembly School for Applied Math and Science (AMS). Ingrid Chung, who piloted the program, and her team identified the five lowest-performing young men in each grade (based on disciplinary incidents, attendance, lateness, and credit accumulation). Too often, the lowest-performing young men in schools are isolated and pushed out of the class and school community. Ingrid was convinced that these young men would be better served if they were “pulled in” rather than “pushed out.” Her belief was that by bringing them together and allowing them to get to know each other, they would

learn to trust and support each other. Twenty young men were invited to participate, and thirteen agreed to join UMOJA. While most of these young men did not know each other prior to UMOJA, some had previously served long-term suspensions due to physical altercations that they had had with one another.

Previously, at the beginning of the year, AMS would take classes to upstate New York on a community-building camping trip. However, this was the first time that a gender-based trip of students spanning the high school grades occurred. A trip like this had never been attempted at AMS; Ingrid and her team were apprehensive, especially about the potential interpersonal dynamics between the students. However, they were certain that with support and an opportunity for pro-social bonding moments, these young men could develop into school leaders.

For a week in August, the young men participated in morning hikes, games, and team-building activities. They cooked and ate together. They were given the space to discuss their lives outside of school and, sometimes, they cried together. Ingrid and her team created a rare opportunity for these students to let their guard down and allow each other into their lives. By giving space for and tapping into the natural leadership skills of these young men – their ability to communicate with each other, take responsibility for their actions, and provide constructive feedback – the adult and student participants were able to create a safe space in which a sense of love, community, and brotherhood was developed.

One of us [Paul Forbes, senior director of ESI], met the young men at the end of the trip. I could not believe that these young men were considered “low-performing” or “at risk.” The

same young men who would yell, scream, and fight to resolve conflict were now sitting in a circle and talking about the issues that bothered them. The same young men who started the week not trusting anyone were committing to be “my brother’s keeper.” After a week, they were able to make a commitment to honor themselves and each other.

UMOJA is now in its third year and continues to serve approximately twenty young men annually. (In the second year, a comparable program, NIA, or “purpose” in Swahili, was launched for girls.) The UMOJA program continued to seek out the young men who needed the most support, and began to consider more teacher recommendations. The participants meet every Tuesday after school for bonding opportunities and again on Saturdays for academic support. During UMOJA, the young men come together for counseling sessions, to share their experiences and build relationships, and to attend race and justice workshops. During these workshops, UMOJA participants learn that their voices not only matter – their voices are *essential* to transform the fractured world that they will inherit.

HOW MENTORING PROGRAMS LIKE UMOJA BUILD POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Three years after the initial camping trip Ingrid had planned for the first UMOJA cohort, I [Paul Forbes] asked her to describe what makes the UMOJA program special. She explained,

It is our belief that through authentic relationships with adult mentors . . . peer mentorship, and brotherhood, and a fierce sense of belonging, we can transform these boys’ experiences of high school, and in turn, their futures. . . .

Our young men [have learned] that brotherhood includes [being responsible] to one another. During the school year, the young men now hold each other accountable for coming to school on time; making smart decisions both inside and outside of school; submitting work and homework on time; and consistently demonstrating the qualities of an UMOJA leader.

As at AMS, educators at many other ESI schools saw the initiative as an opportunity to nurture in-school relationships. In the Research Alliance evaluation of ESI’s implementation, we interviewed nearly 500 teachers, administrators, and students about their ESI experience. Improved relationships among students and between students and school staff was a ubiquitous theme across all four years of the initiative and was the most common response when interviewees were asked to reflect upon changes at their schools as a result of ESI. Over half of the ESI schools reported improved relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students and their peers. One teacher discussed the impact of having the opportunity to spend more time with the male students at her school:

I would just say from my personal experience, having the ability to have a class with tenth grade boys or young men, it’s affected the way I view them. . . . Through meeting with them twice a week I get to connect and communicate with them on a more candid level. . . . We actually get to talk about a lot of things that they probably wouldn’t talk to a teacher about on a normal basis. I think it’s affected how quickly I’ve been able to immerse myself and to feel comfortable with the students.

HOW POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS LEAD TO OTHER POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Educators in ESI schools also saw improved relationships as an important antecedent to other positive outcomes such as school retention and peer accountability. A principal credited the strong relationships that his staff and students developed over the course of ESI for the school's high student retention:

They're still here because we have . . . good trusting relations, so they [students] can come to talk to you, relate to you in a way where they don't feel threatened or feel . . . they'll be pushed off.

In focus groups with students, Black and Latino young men also expressed how important their relationships with teachers were. One student shared:

Sophomore year I had to get surgery. . . . I was out for a month of school. [All three staff members] would constantly check up on me and see how I was doing. It just goes to show that these guys cared about me. . . . This program teaches you how to be compassionate for other people. . . . To have these guys every day that I came to school just made me want to come to school that much more because I got to be with my brothers.

Many of the young men we spoke with described the relationships that they developed with one another as extremely significant. Reflecting on his participation in a peer mentorship program, one student shared the big impact for him of developing close relationships that felt like a family:

I recommend this program to all of my friends. . . . I feel like when you join, you meet people and you learn about people from their experiences. . . . You grow as a person with this program. . . . I think we grew as a brotherhood. I think it goes for everybody that we grew a friendship that can last for a lifetime.

In addition to data collected through interviews and focus groups in ESI schools, the Research Alliance's ESI evaluation drew on a survey administered to students annually in thirty-eight of the ESI schools and between fifteen and twenty-seven comparison schools (depending on the year, from 2013 through 2016). The survey captured students' participation in various activities related to ESI's key domains,³ as well as measures of critical thinking, academic self-concept, sense of fair treatment, perception of school race and cultural climate, and sense of belonging in school.

Analysis of our survey results indicates that ESI had a positive impact on Black and Latino young men's sense of fair treatment and sense of belonging in their schools in grades 11 and 12. We hypothesize that the shifts in key in-school relationships as a result of ESI programs such as UMOJA led to these positive impacts. Considering how alienating schools can be for young men of color (Fergus, Noguera & Martin 2014), these findings on the ways in which schools can create welcoming, nurturing environments for Black and Latino young men are an important contribution to the broader discussion around improving academic outcomes for this segment of the student population.

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3 College-going culture, youth development, and academics: see the introductory section of this article.

LOVE, COMMUNITY, AND BROTHERHOOD IN THE FACE OF TRAGEDY

JJ, who was described in the introductory section of this piece, was one of the original UMOJA leaders. He was tragically murdered just over a year after he graduated from AMS. I [Paul Forbes] went to AMS the day after JJ was killed to visit and mourn with the other UMOJA leaders. I left the school with the same sense of awe that I had when I met the UMOJA leaders three years earlier, after their initial camping trip. Their sense of love, community, and brotherhood endured and was evident in the ways that they held and supported one another through the experience of losing JJ, their friend and brother. Grief counselors were sent to the school from the central and district office. While there were students in the school community who went to meet with them, the UMOJA brothers and I sat in the corner of the room mourning and laughing together. These young men, brothers and Kings, truly embodied the quality of *umoja* – unity – even in the face of loss and tragedy.

No program can compensate for the death of a young man like JJ, nor can any program single-handedly eradicate the appalling injustices that young men of color face every day of their lives. But the enduring solidarity and leadership that these young men have developed in the UMOJA program fills us with hope for the future – not only for our individual Kings, but for our schools and our communities.

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