

What happens to student behavior of five students when they participate in a Young Men's Group that provides ongoing mentoring?

By Faren D'Abell

### **Research Questions**

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What happens to student accountability of 5 students while participating in an after school Young Men's Group?

#### *Sub-questions*

- a. What happens to suspensions and referrals to admin? (Does their involvement in the group affect my propensity to refer?)
- b. What happens to attitudes of the whole class
- c. Do parents/family notice a change in character or attitude?
- d. Does the presence of the Young Men's Group affect the attitudes of girls in the class?

### **Background & Rationale**

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Statistics describing the potential futures of Black men in America are not rosy. In 2004, 50 percent of Black men who dropped out of high school were either unemployed or incarcerated. Nearly one-quarter of Black men who graduated from high school but who did not attend college were incarcerated in the same time period. And a Black boy born today will have a 1 in 3 chance of being incarcerated in his lifetime. These outcomes are not merely the results of a lack of education. Only 34 percent of white male high school dropouts spend time in jail, while 17 percent of Latino males in the same category spend time behind bars.

What can be done to improve the chances of Black boys to graduate and additionally, keep them from moving along the wrong path that could lead to a dysfunctional role in society and, eventually, incarceration? Since most of these students spend much of their day (at least 6.25 hours each day in Chicago elementary schools) at school, this is the time to reach out and help them acquire the skills and abilities they need to survive and thrive in society. A 2006 national survey by the Washington Post confirmed that while Black men are much more likely to fear being arrested, losing their jobs, or being treated unfairly by police, they conversely have hopes and aspirations similar to their White and Latino counterparts. The survey revealed that 94 percent of Black men believe career success is important and 92 percent of Black men believe respect is important. Only 64 percent are concerned about being wealthy.

The National Teachers Academy (NTA) is a public school in Chicago whose population is overwhelmingly impoverished. The student body is almost entirely Black. Going into its fifth year of operation, NTA has had 4 administrations and over a 50% teacher turn over rate. At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, nearly 50% of the teachers were released for budgetary and other reasons, and the new principal was released or resigned as well. The fourth principal in five years will oversee these students for the 2006-2007 school year. This researcher was one of the released teachers.

Students at NTA have little sense of community and do not often connect easily with teachers and staff because of this discontinuity. Relationships are hard to build and

the continued changes cause students to dismiss the possibility that they should trust their teachers and their school environment.

Our group of students was, from the beginning, labeled the most “challenging group of students.” Sixth grade teachers were told that these students had been watched since third grade and we could expect more rough times ahead. The students were all too aware of this label and lived up to it. One sixth grade student described an incident at a sleepover where his “friend” first poured catsup and mustard in his ear while he slept. After cleaning that, he was later awoken by a gun to the head by the same friend.

It became clear that my co- and extra-curricular energy would be best spent creating some sort of solid and lasting community. I had been mentoring one child who I taught two years earlier and decided I would create a mentoring group for young men to help them learn what it means to be a caring man and part of a community. This, I hoped, would transfer from outside of the classroom back into the classroom with more respectful behavior in class.

Three “bad boys” (those who had already this year presented behavior problems in my class and others) and three “school boys” (those who appeared to respect the rules without question) were invited to join our mentoring group. The group would involve weekly meetings after school, outings (auto show, professional sporting events, etc.), in school teambuilding events for the whole grade, and a monthly dinner club where the students would travel to the researchers house and cook a formal dinner for a respected Black member of the community.

### **Research Tools**

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I chose to utilize referral data (suspensions and detentions) and anecdotal data to track behavior among the five students. Additionally, I used student surveys in both the whole class and for the five students in the group. The group completed various writing responses throughout the year as well.

### **Summary of Outcomes / Analysis**

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Data from the four students who participated in the group for the entire year were analyzed. Monthly incidents (the number of times each month a student received a negative anecdotal writeup, received a detention, or received a suspension) were tallied and compared.

The greatest improvement seemed to come from the “bad boys.” Marcus showed the greatest improvement. In October and November, Marcus had a negative incident recorded at least every other day (51% of his days were *with incident* in October and 67% of his days were *with incident* in November). As the year progressed and his participation in the group continued, the number of incidents for Marcus steadily declined. In March, the final month for tabulation, Marcus had dropped his incidents to only 24% of his school days.

The results from Perseus, our other “bad boy,” on the surface do not seem as encouraging. He began the year with 31% of his days *with incident* in October and 24% in November. But his days stayed relatively stable with a similar number of incidents each month, ending in March with 19% of his days *with incident*. What was particularly important to note about Perseus’s growth is the type of incident. As noted by anecdotes

from this researcher and Perseus's other main teacher, Perseus in October and November engaged in many acts of physical aggression – from punching a wall or a locker, to throwing objects across the room in anger. Perseus grew tremendously this year in his ability to control his anger. While he was still receiving negative anecdotal writeups for some outbursts and inappropriate comments, his physically violent aggression declined tremendously. His social worker said at the end of the year that Perseus acknowledged the Young Men's Group for helping him control his anger.

Unfortunately, one of the two "school boys" showed a decline in behavior as the year went on. Dowdy, a new student at the school this year, had 5% of his days with incident in October, followed by 12% in November and no incidents in December and January. However, he had 23% of his days with incident in February and 29% in March. He struggled this year and tried to "fit in" both with the members of the Young Men's Group, and with other "bad boys" in school. This negative influence seems to have caused this impressionable young man to act out more than he would have in other situations. Martin was a relatively stable "school boy" with no incidents except for 14% of his days in January with incident and 5% of his days in March. The January reports were because of Martin joining in with four other boys in the lunchroom teasing a girl for being overweight. Martin was assigned a detention and missed the detention, resulting in another.

These data suggest that both school boys and bad boys are susceptible to peer pressure. School boys joined in occasionally when others were acting inappropriately, but more importantly, bad boys joined in more often when others were acting appropriately.

All members of the group achieved the following goals:

1. Created 6th grade team building event attended by 30+ sixth graders after school;
2. Acted as informal peer counselors to students outside the group;
3. Stepped up as spokespeople for sixth grade and the group;
4. Improved in some areas of self regulation and in helping others solve problems;
5. Asked to participate in UIC future teacher recruitment program;

## **Policy Implications**

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Students of any behavioral stature crave adult attention. Some people in the community acknowledged that parental involvement is not always available. Give teachers and other staff the training and resources (physical space and funding) to provide a nurturing environment for some of our struggling students.

Research suggests that mentoring relationships that last less than sixth months cause a student to be worse off in terms of self esteem and other measures than if the student had no mentor at all. Ensure that when a mentoring relationship is created, the mentors and students are committed to a full year or more in the program.

Students in these groups need not only emotional and intellectual stimulation, but they need an outlet for physical activity. Attempt to partner with local park districts or even the physical education teacher to acquire equipment, space, and know-how to help students have a physical release.

Because the commitment should be a whole year commitment, do not wait long to identify the students at risk who might benefit from your program. Identify them early and began activities early. If you have not fully created the program, engage students in molding the program at the outset.

Middle school students want to learn and they want to help others. Give students meaningful activities that involve social justice, improving the neighborhood, etc. Make the activities ones that students can apply what they've already learned while learning more. Students want to be teachers. Let them teach what they learned to others.

Be open to change. Overall student needs change. The students themselves are changing. Be flexible and be open to the possibility that what you thought would work in the planning stage is not what works in reality.

School-based mentoring programs have been shown to be more effective than community-based after school programs. Partner with community activists and local businesses to increase opportunities for students, but implore local school boards to provide curricular time for social-emotional curricular activities during the school day.

### Further Questions

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- Some of our guiding principles were derived from *Real Boys' Voices*. One of the hallmarks of a good mentoring program, according to *Voices*, is combating homophobia. Had I addressed the homophobia issue more directly with my young men, would that have helped the group act more respectful around other students?
- Will inclusion of more good boys help sway the peer pressure toward appropriate actions rather than a mix of pressure resulting in both ends of the spectrum coming toward the middle?
- Would more interaction with the girls' groups improve student self esteem or behavior?
- Would regular partnering with *one* community organization improve outcomes?

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