Learning through Mentorship:
Accessing opportunities to support boys
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Abstract*: The "Young Lions" is a boys mentorship program that was established for marginalized, middle school boys in an urban school in the northwest of Toronto. This article draws on my experiences as founder and mentor in this program, as well as my experiences as a middle school teacher implementing mentorship pedagogy, to articulate what it means to truly 'care' for our boys. The article begins by providing a context for the concerns about boys, and goes on to discuss the opportunities and challenges inherent in mentorship as a method of addressing boys' underachievement, disengagement and social/emotional wellbeing. I close by providing four considerations for effective mentorship that can assist in establishing or maintaining boys mentorship programs, or considering mentorship as a powerful approach to teaching.*

My observations about boys: The context

Perhaps like many of my colleagues, I didn't grow up knowing that I wanted to be a teacher. In fact, it wasn't until the last two years of my undergraduate studies where I had an opportunity to work with some young people in an after-school African heritage program that I began my journey along this path. At this stage I was far from convinced that this was my life's purpose, but the vibe in our once a week meetings, the children's smiling faces, laughter, hugs, and the beauty of their inquiring minds was contagious. Contrasting all of the pleasures, the challenges of the job were also quite prevalent. From this early encounter I learned that many children in our program were struggling academically, feeling disconnected from school, and their parents were searching for answers. The close and sustained connections that I was able to build with some of those children convinced me that as a teacher, I could establish the types of relationships with students that could help to reconnect some of the students who seemed to need it the most.

My on-the-job training as a teacher candidate primarily took place at a middle school (grades 6,7,8) in the northwest corner of Toronto. The neighbourhood was an uneven mix in terms of social class (mostly working class and some middle class families) and race/ethnicity (predominantly Asian students and Black students from the Caribbean, with the remaining 20% of the students being White). Upon entering the school it wasn't long before I observed a particular group of students that were struggling to successfully negotiate their way through school, were most 'at-risk', and with whom I was strongly being encouraged to work. This group was boys, predominantly from working class families and predominantly racialized[1]. During my

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[1] The Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in the *Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report (2010)* has defined racialized groups as those who may experience social inequities on the basis of their perceived common racial
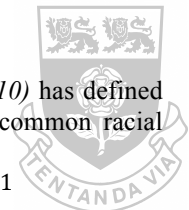
first teaching block in a grade 7 classroom, for example, in addition to my assigned teaching time I was asked to pull out a group of 3 Black boys from my host classroom who had proven to be a challenge for the teacher. Their passion for socializing in the classroom, frequent interruptions, and at times refusal to follow instructions were unwanted to say the least. Although we only saw each other once a week I was able to make a connection with these boys – one that we both valued and anxiously anticipated. While I was not given a set curriculum to teach during the periods we spent together, and I probably would have struggled at that point to implement a formal curriculum anyways, we still made use of our time. We explored topics that seemed to interest them (girls, music, gangs) and other materials which I felt connected to their identity as Black males (e.g. we watched movies like *Malcolm X* and *Roots* and had conversations about these films). The time we had been given to exist outside of the 'institutional space' felt good. While I have no evidence to argue the impact of our relationship on their academic achievement, I know for us the time spent together was a meaningful part of our individual journeys that began to cultivate our sense of belonging in the school.

When I eventually graduated with my Bachelor of Education I found myself back at this same school with a full-time contract position. Now spending time with the children in this community on a daily basis, I gained even more insight into the challenges that existed. Although there was an ethnic/racial mix in the school and a relatively even split amongst the genders, a passing glance at the office bench or a periodic listen to the complaints and concerns shared over lunch in the staffroom told a very different story of the student demographic. In fact, it would have been very difficult not to notice that the majority of behaviour concerns were males, most of them living in the low-income housing complexes located close to the school, most of them racialized, and more specifically, most of them Black. In sitting in meetings and listening to colleagues talk about these 'challenging' students, it was also obvious that there was an inability to build positive relationships with this student population and a sense of frustration with their 'defiance' and 'aggression'.   While there were certainly a few teachers that had worked to build a more positive relationship with these boys, it was obvious that on many levels the needs of these students were not being fulfilled.

In sharing my initial observations, it is not my intention to present an image that all racialized boys are struggling in school and need a mentor to teach them how to be respectful and successful in school. In fact, as the majority of racialized students in the school were 'doing just fine' by school standards, such conclusions are proven to be inaccurate.   Rather, my purpose is to point out that of the few students who were struggling the most, racialized boys from low-income communities were overrepresented. For me, this inequity created many questions and caused great concern.   In the end, I was curious as to what role the relationship I had been slowly building with this particular demographic might play in helping to breakdown these barriers and support children in advocating for themselves and their communities.

What these observations might mean: The Data

The gap that existed for these boys in their education became increasingly obvious to me in my first few years of teaching. While I often wondered if this was a particular trend that we were

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background, colour and/or ethnicity, and who may be subjected to differential treatment in the society and its institutions (TDSB, 2010a).

experiencing in our school, research has shown this not to be the case. Various data sources have demonstrated that boys as a group are underachieving and disengaging in comparison to their female counterparts, a phenomenon often referred to as the *gender gap*.

I have come to understand that the *gender gap* is illustrated through the use of a number of different measurement tools which provide a general picture of how boys are doing in relation to girls. While my intention is not to compare males and females as a means of centering the boys, exploring this data does help to clarify a reality in many Ontario schools where boys are having difficulty realizing their true potential and some level of intervention is required. According to data collected through the Early Development Instrument (EDI)[2] in the Spring of 2008, 21% of male students are considered vulnerable which is considerably more than their female counterparts (TDSB, 2010b). The Education Quality Accountability Office (EQAO) assessments indicate that while both boys and girls are making gains at the primary and junior levels, in comparison to their female counterparts, a smaller percentage of boys are performing at or above the provincial standard in each of the three subject areas tested – reading, writing and math (EQAO, 2008a: 7). EQAO results also indicate similar results at the secondary level where the number of students who received a score that met the expected standard on the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) is consistently higher for female students (EQAO, 2008b: 10-13). Furthermore, at the post-secondary level males have formed a minority of the undergraduate student population since the 1980s, and males also tend to have higher leaving rates than females during the first year at university and college (Kerr, 2010: 4). Although it is important to point out that there are areas where boys as a group are outperforming girls[3], the data clearly points to a reality where too many boys are underachieving academically. What this generalized data fails to indicate is 'which boys' we are talking about.

Outside of academics, the *gender gap* observed for certain boys in other areas of their schooling was also not unique. In general terms, this disproportionate disengagement of boys is evident when looking beyond test scores to some other indicators of school success. Statistics indicate that 63.7% of drop-outs across Canada are male (StatsCan, 2004). The provincial data on suspensions and expulsions indicates that in 2007-08 boys accounted for 75% of suspensions in Ontario, and 87% of expelled students (OME, 2007-08). It is interesting to note that between 20-22% of this suspended or expelled group are students with *exceptionalities*[4] (OME, 2007-08). In looking at some of the data on special education it is also worthy of note that in the province, the average ratio of males to females who are identified as exceptional students is 2:1 (OME, 2010). Our understanding of this particular group is further clarified when we consider that 25% of these identified children report being lonely, and 35% of them drop out (Killoran, 2005). Particularly because of the link between special education, disengagement and even criminal activity, these

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[2] The Early Development Instrument (EDI) is a community measure of young children's school readiness that has five domains: *Physical Health and Well-Being, Social Knowledge and Competence, Emotional Health and Maturity, Language Skills and Cognitive Development, Communication and General Knowledge.*

[3] Kerr (2010) indicates that according to EQAO mathematics scores boys are consistently outperforming girls in both level 3 and 4. As well, while females enroll in university prep courses at a higher rate than males, this is not true for geometry and algebra. Statistics Canada also suggests that in graduate programs it is the males that are entering at a higher rate (Kerr, 2010: 3).

[4] According to the Ontario Ministry of Education an exceptional pupil is a pupil whose behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical or multiple exceptionalities are such that he or she is considered to need placement in a special education program by a committee (OME, 2007-08)

statistics are of great concern for our boys. While useful in determining that boys as a group are more 'disengaged' in their schooling, again what the data disaggregated by gender fails to tell us is 'which boys' we are talking about.

In response to the question 'which boys', the latest data from the Toronto District School Board (TDSB)[5] indicates that racialized students continue to be at the bottom of the hierarchy in terms of academic achievement and successfully negotiating their schooling. The TDSB *Achievement Gap Task Force Draft Report* (2010) indicates that:

> *Of the 25% who do not graduate, the largest numbers are students of Aboriginal, Black (African heritage), Hispanic, Portuguese, Middle Eastern background. TDSB data shows that in proportion to their numbers, these students have the lowest test scores (EQAO), the lowest rates of credit accumulation through secondary school, and the highest dropout rates. As well, based on our data, students of these backgrounds are likely to have the lowest rates of school attendance and the highest suspension rates. The achievement gap for these groups has existed since the 1980's. (Draft Report, 2010)*

In addition to the race/ethnicity factor, data from the 2006 TDSB census indicates that social class continues to be a significant determinant in terms of academic success (TDSB, 2009). One example of this can be found in data indicating that 29.8% of students in low-income dwellings are at risk due to low credit accumulation by the end of grade 9, compared to 9.1% in high-income dwellings (TDSB, 2004). Thus, disaggregating the boys' achievement data by both race and class provides a much clearer picture of who is receiving an unequal education and therefore needs to have access to additional academic supports.

What does this all mean for boys, education and schooling? Well, it does not mean that in focusing on boys, we must negate the many challenges that confront segments of our female student population. In *Doing Just Fine: Giving Attention to the Needs of Girls* Gaymes San Vicente (2010) clearly articulates the need to pay attention to obstacles that exist for girls both academically and in the realm of social/emotional wellbeing and self-perception. What it does mean, as I witnessed at my school, is that some boys, particularly those from racialized and low-income communities, are receiving an unequal education.   Entitled to equal opportunities and equitable outcomes, I came to realize that these boys required an appropriate response that could help to re-engage them, support them academically, and support them in the realm of social/emotional development as they attempted to figure out what it means to be a boy or a man and how they could successfully negotiate schooling from their own particular social location.

"A few teachers who cared"

I felt compelled to respond to the challenges that confronted these boys and wanted to build on the relationship we had begun to establish. In doing so I was in search of something that would attract them, appeal to their interests, give us a comfortable 'space' to be ourselves, and explore what mattered to them. My response was the *Young Lions Mentorship Program* which will be

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[5] The Toronto District School Board is the largest school board in Canada and the only one that currently collects race-based statistics.

explored in the following sections. Recently I had cause to reflect on the origins of this program as I had lunch with one of the boys from my first year of teaching who had found my profile on *facebook* and wanted to hook up. Given his very difficult history in school, I was quite anxious to hear what he was up to now. Over lunch he told me of his recent acceptance to law school, news which filled me with great pride and optimism as I thought back to all of his suspensions and other challenges during grades 7 and 8. I asked him what made the difference for him, a question to which he quickly responded "a few teachers who cared". It is this notion of 'caring' in the context of mentorship that will be explored through a look at the *Young Lions* program, and how such a relationship may illuminate the responsibilities, opportunities and possibilities inherent in boys' mentorship as a response to the issues of social/emotional well being, disengagement, underachievement, high dropout rates, school to prison pipeline (*Toronto Star*, June 6, 2009), and most popularly referenced 'achievement gap' that exists for boys in education in Ontario and elsewhere.

Room 106: The Young Lions Mentorship Program

I believe it was the heavy burden I felt to respond to the struggles of this group of boys that compelled me to seek ways to engage them even outside of the confines of my classroom. Although our passing nods in the hallways, and casual conversations over lunch in the cafeteria or outside on the playground, helped to build a bond that felt meaningful, this didn't seem to be enough. It didn't provide the kind of insight into their lives or the depth of connection that I felt was necessary to truly collaborate for change. I was of the opinion that I needed a comfortable space where we could feel safe to explore our passions, fears, concerns and possibilities. Eventually we found that space.

I remember our first meeting sitting in a circle on the tattered couches in the back of my grade 8 classroom. It was myself and about 8-10 boys who I had invited to meet with me over lunch. While there was no official selection process to determine who was to be invited to this *cipher*[6], I had deliberately chosen the boys who were getting the most negative attention in the building. I didn't really have a curriculum to follow or even a plan, but I knew that it was important for us to connect. As we slouched on the couches enjoying our break from the daily routines of school, the moments of silence in the conversation quickly began to dissipate as we became more comfortable discussing whatever was on their minds. From gangs, to girls to guns, to how they felt disrespected in the school, I focused on listening to their thoughts and observing their interactions with each other. Every once in a while I shared a thought, experience or perspective on the issue but my contribution was minimal.   I felt like what was most important to this process was the trust we developed knowing that what was shared in that room stayed in that room. This informal gathering on the couches of room 106 became a weekly experience that, based on their regular attendance, the boys seemed to truly value.

Eventually, our activities grew beyond the couch conversations. The expansion was based on the identified interests and needs of the students. While this was important, to stay grounded in what mattered to them, I also wanted us to push our thinking on various issues and explore alternative

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[6] In the spirit of the hip hop culture that many of the boys associated with, the term *cipher* is hip hop terminology used to describe a social gathering where participants share thoughts either in the form of a conversation or in poetic verse.

ways of viewing the circumstances that they were faced with. The possibilities for programming and engagement were many. One year we had advertised over the P.A. system that we were hosting an after school discussion on "What it means to be a man" to be followed by fun activities in the gym. We had approximately thirty boys show up to explore their ideas about manhood, the constructs they were being sold in popular media, and the possibilities that existed beyond those limited notions. We will return to this discussion in the next section of this paper titled *Talking about masculinity*. This is significant, for over time these conversations about boyhood or manhood became an important part of our program as we worked together and tried to personalize what this really meant to us. These gatherings were sometimes enhanced by a group of young men from the neighbouring secondary school who had heard about our *Young Lions* group and wanted to 'give back' and offer a perspective.

A number of the boys had also taken a keen interest in basketball so we decided to add a weekly afterschool basketball component where we would talk for a few minutes and then play around on the court. Although our existence as a boys' mentorship program in some ways mirrored the *Boys to Men* program that was a board initiative in the TDSB, we came up with the name "*Young Lions*" to distinguish ourselves and personalize our experience. The boys seemed to really like the name and the symbolism of the lion as we talked about the respect that the lion commanded because of its courage, but also its responsibility to its family. While in hindsight I could identify the challenges with the symbolism of the lion as being associated with stereotypically male characteristics (e.g. strength, courage, confidence and a commanding presence), this was where the boys (and perhaps we all) were at as we tried to claim our space and reach new possibilities.

Some of our other activities included afterschool homework help, dominoes, film viewings and discussions, lunchtime walks to the park – the possibilities were many. I also tried to put them in leadership roles whenever possible; whether it was organizing an assembly, hosting a 3-on-3 basketball tournament, working on the school garden or displaying posters. I felt it was important for them, for me, and particularly for the other staff and students to begin to see the boys in a different light as they took on positions of responsibility (even though I had my doubts about some of them being ready for such tasks). I think it was the group of boys I worked with in the fourth year of the program that were particularly captivated by hip hop music and culture. Noticing the interest in hip hop that existed throughout the school I had set up a digital recording studio where students could be trained in the use of the equipment and could engage in a variety of activities. The studio became another place where some of the boys seemed to really feel at home. They stepped into the space and began to share some of their most intimate thoughts and fears, providing a clear window into what they perceived to be their reality. They eventually recorded a song called "Don't Rock It", which grew out of our conversations about gangs, and articulated the need to abolish the Bloods/Crips warfare that was going on in the neighbourhood. The lyrics they shared were profound.

I remember them days when it wasn't easy
Some days I wish my paps would come and see me
But I guess it ain't possible, cause he's always in and out of jail
And you know it ain't easy to bail
Maybe some day, we'll probably get to be together and never leave each other, if you change
But if you don't, I guess it'll always be the same
Every day, I cry, pray and say,
Yo God, make sure my paps is okay

Cause he's always in some type of trouble
And you know and I know that we both love each other….
….So let's keep it that way

<div align="right">*Spitta (2005)*</div>

People say we have the same faces
I miss you so much, I wish that we could trade places
All you gotta do is keep yourself in check
You'd rather sell drugs, what's the next step, I hope it ain't dead
That's the reason why you should stop rockin' the red
You gotta stop it
Don't even rock it, don't put it in your pockets
Your head or your waist, cause what if a bullet passes your head
That'll be the thing that made you die
Every time I think of you it brings tears to my eyes
Got me sayin' why all my people gotta die
You said that you would always be by my side but now you're not here
All that does is bring anger and rage, make me feel like doing something
To any crip that comes in my face, bust his life
Writin' this to you in case you don't make it tonight

<div align="right">*Baby Paps (2005)*</div>

To what degree the boys' thoughts were shaped by their notions of masculinity and what they felt men could talk about in their lyrics is unclear, but this is where the boys were at, and this is what our program needed to engage with.

Talking about masculinity

In my experiences talking about masculinity with the boys in the *Young Lions Mentorship Program*, I have observed how popular culture versions of masculinity greatly influence how they see themselves, as well as how they are seen by others. The *gangster*, *thug*, *player*, *action hero*, and *hustler* are all images that were being sold to and consumed by our boys and some of their teachers and were having detrimental effects. The gender stereotype that boys are disruptive, dangerous, threatening or violent, particularly those from racialized communities, is confirmed by literature that speaks to the hyper-masculine socialization of boys (San Vicente, 2006; hooks, 2004; Hutchinson, 1994; Yourgrau, 2006). More importantly, my interactions with the *Young Lions* has indicated to me that these perceptions impact the boys, their peers and their teachers in complex ways, and that masculinity is something we all need to figure out in order to address the challenges that exist for boys in schooling.

I recall quite a few incidents where the boys had fallen victim to a teacher-reinforced gender stereotype of boys being aggressive or intimidating. On one occasion, one of the boys' teachers complained to me that when the boys walk down the hallway "they look like a gang" – explaining that their walk, presence and appearance provoked that image (San Vicente, 2006: 96). At another time, in one of our *Young Lions'* discussions a member recounted an experience where his teacher told him to "sit down because when he stands in people's faces he is threatening like a predator."(San Vicente, 2006: 95) Given that the majority of mentees were from working class, racialized communities (quite opposite from most of their teachers), issues of class and race of course often complicated these matters. For example, one member of our group articulated his impression that many of the teachers assumed the boys were *gang bangers* or that

all Black boys act like 50 Cent. As the boys continued to share their experiences, many things became clearer to me. In their eyes, who they are – their dress, their demeanor, their attitude were often feared by their teachers and viewed as rebellious and threatening. In my observation it became very difficult for teachers to teach boys for whom they had, or were perceived to have, fear and very little respect.

Of course, these very stereotypical and oppressive versions of masculinity that had impacted some of their teachers were in many ways internalized by the boys themselves. Based on their actions at times, as well as my reading of our conversations, many of the boys had bought into an image of themselves as unintelligent, threatening, rebellious or *bad*. So, in some ways the boys would periodically perform these identities in the interactions with other students and staff; being aggressive and defiant as a means of resistance, thus reinforcing the same stereotypes they complained about. Interestingly enough, contrary to this hyper-masculine persona of boys as rough, violent and perhaps less vulnerable, my experiences with the *Young Lions* as well as my all-boys and co-ed classes indicate that it is boys, and not girls, that are more likely to be the victims of physical violence themselves. During my teaching career I have attended two funerals for young people, had another student shot at a party, visited and talked on the phone to students who were arrested or convicted and serving jail time, and been updated by returning mentees about former students who are in and out of the penal system; these have all been boys. The emersion of some boys in a culture of violence is clearly witnessed in the song lyrics printed above where two members of the *Young Lions* talk about their fears of the violence that surrounds them and that has impacted the men in their lives. Such insights help us to look more critically at our often narrow perceptions of "disengaged", "defiant" or "aggressive" boys as perpetrators, and to see the ways in which they themselves are victimized and searching for a way to respond.

In the context of their schooling, the social construction of these boys played out in complicated ways and raised a number of questions relating to both their achievement and engagement. How was their underachievement and/or disengagement impacted by the restricted cpacity in which they saw themselves and in which they were seen by their teachers? Is there a correlation between the construction of boys as hyper, aggressive, unemotional and violent and the high suspension rates, expulsion rates, 'push-out'[7] rates, and participation in special education for boys? How do the stereotypical perceptions of boys, and dominant notions of masculinity, intersect with race and class? For example, how do low-income Latino boys perceive themselves and how are they perceived by others; and how might this differ from how middle-class White boys see themselves? What can we learn from the similarities and differences in how manhood is portrayed for various groups of boys? My time with the *Young Lions* has convinced me that these questions must be explored with boys, girls and educators as we attempt to unpack masculinity and consider how these perceptions shape the education of students.

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Over the years, our mentorship program evolved as I learned from the boys in the community and tried to improve the ways in which I responded to their needs. In the second year of the *Young*

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[7] The term 'push out' is often used in place of 'drop-out' to allude to the various systemic factors which ultimately discourage and disengage children and give rise to students eventually making the decision to stop attending school.

Lions, two other male teachers joined me and we decided to take on four boys each, a reduced number which allowed us as mentors to build a more intimate relationship. At times we met in our separate groups, and other times we gathered for larger group activities. Our focus on providing opportunities for the most marginalized boys in the school meant that the demographics of the group remained primarily boys from racialized, low-income communities. However, as we saw the need for all boys to have critical conversations about masculinity and considered the benefits of hearing multiple perspectives and experiences, we became deliberate about also having boys in our group who were experiencing noticeable success in some area of their schooling. We developed a tradition of starting the year with an overnight trip to an *outdoor education centre*[8] which we discovered helped us to quickly establish close relationships with the boys, building trust, and creating a sense of belonging and validation. With the increased popularity of the program in both the school and community, at some point we had also developed a selection process which involved interviewing the students, collecting teacher referrals and sitting down as a team of mentors to decide which boys we had the capacity to serve in the program.

In terms of what the boys took away from the program, it is hard to quantify, measure or put into words. However, based on their feedback over the years, through return visits, *facebook* conversations, and one-on-one meetings I've had with a few of the alumni, I think the most appropriate response to this question is "an unparalleled experience." Commenting on what students need to be successful Dei (2000) says, *"... once the basic needs of food and shelter are addressed, a student still must gain a sense of belonging, hope, validation and competence that fosters a greater ability to concentrate on the task of learning."* I think that for the boys our mentorship program was, at least to some extent, able to cultivate this sense of *belonging*, *hope*, *validation* and *competence* that could support them on their journeys through school and through life.

In reflecting on my experiences with the Young Lions I have come to understand mentorship in two ways, both as programs and as pedagogy; programs like *Boys 2 Men* (TDSB), *Big Brothers*, athletic mentorship programs, and the *Young Lions* discussed above, and a pedagogy that can be implemented across teaching and learning interactions as an approach to teaching. My learning has been that mentorship can foster the types of relationships that can begin to reduce the underachievement of some boys, re-engage the disengaged, and nurture young men who are critical, conscious and contributors to a just society.

Mentorship: Opportunities and Challenges

My experiences with the *Young Lions Mentorship Program* has taught me that within mentorship, as program and as pedagogy, there are many opportunities for mentors and mentees, as well as many challenges. To be clear, given the context explored in the last section, when I speak of mentorship I mean the following: investing in relationships with young people and their families; not 'accepting' individuals but embracing them; committing to the holistic development of children both inside and outside of the classroom and school; being conscious of the popular

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[8] Outdoor Education Centres are particular to some school boards and offer students curriculum based "beyond the indoor classroom" learning experiences. The aim of these experiences is to awaken students to their connection to the built and natural world around them. Whether in an urban or rural setting, students are "learning by doing".

story and critical of its 'truth' and impact; chillin' out listening to music and talking; watching a movie and having a follow-up discussion; going for a walk; going on a camping trip; pounds and high-fives in the hallway; collective goal-setting; advocacy; self-reflection; laughing together; dinner and a movie; moral purpose; diversity; academic and social/emotional support; opportunities to develop the leader in us; active citizenship; and social consciousness. For me, mentorship is all of these things and more. It is respecting the identities of the mentees, valuing their ways of knowing, and inviting their essence into our classrooms and institutional spaces - inevitably providing a space for them to be themselves, discuss what's on their minds, share perspectives and consider solutions.   Thus, the opportunity that exists within this relationship is to talk with students on a deeper level, understand where they're coming from, engage with their world and bring it into the classroom. At its core, mentorship is a spiritual commitment that transcends the traditional teacher/student boundary in order to induce the true genius of our students, for without the expansion of what is considered legitimate in the culture of schooling, the true academic and spiritual potential of our boys will necessarily be compromised.

This, in essence, I refer to as the opportunity for '*love'*, a concept that has often been disassociated from our boys in school. In fact, my position as a mentor has allowed me to see how it is the fear of youth culture and of our children, particularly our boys who live on the margins, which creates a deficient environment that cripples the education of this population. Further, my observations also indicate that in the presence of this fear of some of our youth, there is an absence of love; and this absence of love makes it extremely difficult for some of our children to succeed. So, what does the opportunity to explore *'love'* and *'caring'* in our relationships with boys look like? Specifically, what does this *love* look like in the context of mentorship?

The research on culturally responsive teaching tells us that our teaching must be inclusive and grounded in the lives and communities of the children we serve (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This notion helps to clarify what *love* looks like in the context of mentorship. It means that what we choose to explore with children must include the experiences, perspectives, and cultures of their communities, which then allows mentees to be connected to their educational experience. This is absolutely needed to begin to address the tension that exists between youth culture and other non-dominant cultures, and the middle class culture promoted through school. At the same time, research on resilience contributes to the notion of what *love* could mean for our boys, articulating the importance of supporting social competence, problem solving skills, a sense of autonomy, and a sense of purpose and future (Benard, 2004). Of course, these characteristics of the resilient child must not be understood as inherent deficits in certain boys from certain communities, but rather we must give attention to the processes by which these characteristics have been taken from certain groups of students thus contributing to the injustice of inequitable education. It is by paying attention to the process of exclusion that we can begin the social justice work of restoration with the students with whom we work. According to Benard our role as educators is critical as "One of the most important and consistent findings in resilience research is the power of schools, especially of teachers, to turn a child's life from risk to resilience….but…on the other hand, studies show school failure to be the single strongest predictor of adolescent risk." (Benard, 2004) What does this all mean in student language? According to Corbett and Wilson's (2002) research on *What Urban Students Say About Good Teaching* children want teachers who: push students, maintain order, are willing to help, explain until everyone understands, vary classroom

activities, and try to understand students. My experiences with the *Young Lions* suggest that these approaches are an essential component of good mentorship pedagogy and they collectively hi-light the opportunities that exist for mentees through effective mentorship relationships.

In addition to the opportunities for mentees explored above, mentorship also offers a means of professional development for educators that I feel can be unparalleled in its ability to provide insight into what can work for our most marginalized student populations, and by *universal design*, for all children. I often tell people that my time spent with the boys in the *Young Lions Mentorship Program* was as much for my own development as an educator and as a person as it was for the boys and their personal journeys. The relationships we built through mentorship offered me a clearer window into the complexities of these boys' lives, both their challenges and their assets. It became a transformational opportunity for me to refine my pedagogical practice, challenge destructive versions of masculinity, build relationships with parents and community, engage in curriculum that was culturally relevant and grounded in a more nuanced understanding of the lives of my mentees - all within an approach that was less traditional and more responsive. It was this relationship that provided a possibility for not only re-engaging our disengaged and marginalized boys, but exploring versions of masculinity that were anti-oppressive, and thus liberating for both males and females. Through them I have moved further along an infinite continuum of understanding what it means to be an effective mentor and teacher.

Four components of effective mentorship

Given the understanding of mentorship explored in this article it should be clear that not everybody can mentor effectively, and certainly not all male teachers make for good mentors of boys. Coaches and mentors who simply tell boys to "be tough", "play hard", "suck it up" and "be a man" are neither adequate nor desirable. So who then is fit to mentor? To be clear, when I began as a mentor in the fourth year of my teaching career I was 'green' so to speak. I had passion for boys' success and a lot of perseverance, but no formulated idea of what effective mentorship meant. I knew that it was important for boys to consider what kind of men they wanted to be but I was unsure of what that actually looked like. I believe that even at this stage on a developmental continuum I was able to connect with my mentees in ways that were meaningful and transformative. Subsequently, what I describe below as effective mentorship is an evolved understanding based on my observations and experiences over the last nine years doing mentorship work with both marginalized and non-marginalized populations. My experiences and observations suggest that effective mentorship boils down to a checklist of **four simple components: passion, purpose, critical engagement and perseverance.** Within these components lie both the challenges of mentorship and the possibilities.

Passion embodies the commitment to go beyond the confines of the traditional teacher/student relationship. Again, in the words of the former mentee who described his journey from risk to resilience to law school, it is "a few teachers who cared". This is the *love* that I speak of in the previous section as an opportunity for boys; the presence of teachers who could see beyond this student's difficulties to recognize his talents and potential; teachers who weren't afraid of him but rather embraced him and sought to understand the reasons for his anger and discontent; who confronted the challenge presented by this student and didn't give up. It is this passion that contributes to a sense of belonging for students – a sense that regardless of their academic ability,

behavioural needs or other issues, they are welcomed and provided a comfortable space. This 'belonging' is achieved through both love and respect: love and respect that exists in the absence of fear, ignorance or judgment, that allows us all to be validated and feel important, and that enables our resilience even in the face of poverty, family challenges and systemic barriers. My experiences working closely with boys has taught me that there are too many of them for whom this welcoming, safe environment has not been made available in the traditional model of schooling. However, the possibility to provide this love is rooted in the type of passion that I speak of as both a challenge and an opportunity of effective mentorship.

While passion is certainly a prerequisite for effective mentorship, it is our underlying **purpose** that guides the type of mentorship that can be transformative. So what is our goal in mentoring boys? If not to collaboratively engage in liberating practices that help to move boys beyond the barriers that challenge them as individuals and their communities as a whole, then to what end do we labour? More specifically, as Gaymes San Vicente (2010) points out, our purpose involves creating "Socially and politically conscious young people, who can understand and articulate their relationship to the world around them and each other. Young people who can use this knowledge to actively participate in the transformation of their community to work against oppression and for a socially just world."(Gaymes San Vicente, 2010: 5) Certainly, the starting point in moving boys forward along this continuum has to be our knowledge of the boys that we are working with. Who are they? What are their interests? What do they value? Where do they live? What communities do they come from? What challenges do they face? What are their fears? What are their aspirations? It is the answers to these questions that can help to chart the path forward. This is our rationale or purpose for engaging in mentorship; it is a matter of social justice for "the greatest social injustice that we can offer to any child is an education that is inferior." (Lee, 2011) Thus, while the goal for mentorship is to contribute to a more equitable and just schooling experience and world, critical engagement can be seen as the tool we must utilize to get us there.

Critical engagement I believe is the foundation from which we can continually grow in our efforts to serve our students and the communities they come from. By critical engagement I refer to an approach that includes two things: 1) critical self-reflection as a mentor, and 2) critical analysis of issues of justice, power and privilege.

In terms of the need for critical self-reflection, we need to confront the reality that "We teach who we are." In other words, we cannot separate who we are from our teaching practice. So, who we are as a person is extremely important in terms of who we become as educators. What are my biases? What are my notions of gender and gender roles? How do I define success? How do I understand my own power and privilege as a male or female? These are all essential questions that we must explore. Thus, mentorship as I see it is a deep commitment to nurturing and sharing the best in ourselves. It is a process that requires constant, critical reflection so that the person we present to our mentees can be one who is socially conscious, respectful of others, wise, enabling and a life-long learner in the truest sense.

Beyond self-reflection, the other component of critical engagement is our effort to explore issues of justice. Enid Lee (2011) provides an appropriate framework for us to consider mentorship in this context of activism and social justice. She insists that we must conceive of our work of

providing quality education as a right and not a favour; and see ourselves as servants and not saviors. Such an approach is imperative if we are to go beyond the tendency of 'do gooders' to step in and try to 'fix the problem', a practice which lacks sustainability and ultimately continues to marginalize the groups that we are trying to serve by denying them self-determination and failing to recognize their assets. Thus, our goal in working with children must be to empower them to change society and their communities, not to get out of communities that we, through our teaching, present as being 'the problem'. A critical approach demands that children have opportunities to focus on the assets that exist within the community. As well, not being afraid to name the injustice – talking about race, class, gender, and sexual orientation is an important part of this evolved notion of mentorship.

Following this, in working with the *Young Lions* mentees perhaps my greatest challenge while pursuing my purpose was balancing the fine line between structure and agency. Though I found it important for both marginalized and privileged children to understand that there are structures in place that have worked to disenfranchise certain communities, and that it is not 'their fault', at the same time, I knew it was important not to leave my mentees thinking that they have no knowledge or agency to intervene in these processes. It is perhaps in reflecting on my work with the *Young Lions* that I realize I needed to spend more time helping them understand the experience of immigration, classism, unemployment, justice, etc., and how the presence or absence of these structures privilege some while disadvantaging others. This I find would have been more effective mentorship and would have complimented the idea that they all have a role to play, either from their position of privilege or marginalization, in challenging the oppressive structures that exist and operate to deny their ideals of equity and justice.

Lastly, **perseverance** is absolutely necessary for effective mentorship. Perhaps the most inescapable truth that I have witnessed in my years working with marginalized male populations, both in and outside of mentorship programs, is that mentorship is difficult work. It is difficult work because of the challenges that exist when working with students who do not see themselves in a positive light, and colleagues who struggle to believe in the potential of your approach. In terms of students, for one, deconstructing popular culture versions of masculinity is difficult work because of all the conflicting images that surround them. This work takes considerable time and must be preceded by a trusting and respectful relationship. Secondly, cultivating a sense of *hope*, *belonging*, *validation* and *competence* is not a quick process and not always easily transferable to academic achievement or school engagement. Thus, there were many mentees who we worked with over the years who were respectful, committed and active participants in our *Young Lions* activities but continued to experience the same challenges in their schooling. For this reason, having passion, a purpose, critical engagement and perseverance were imperative to staying the course and understanding that, by simply providing a space where these children belonged and their challenges and concerns were validated, we had taken a step in the right direction.

Of course, the uncertainty around whether our mentorship program produced results posed a problem for many of my colleagues. Without an understanding of equity and the need to treat children differently to facilitate equal access, they sometimes resisted the attention we give to certain boys as they perceived this treatment as 'unequal' and 'unfair'. Operating from a position that all children should have the same opportunities, but failing to see or understand the very

structures that had already functioned to prevent this ideal, they could not comprehend working with different children in different ways to provide equitable outcomes. Thus, as an effective mentor you are ultimately confronting issues of justice in education and engaging in advocacy work. This journey requires passion, purpose, critical engagement and perseverance to do what is necessary to transform lives.

Conclusion

In the end, from my experience what can be offered through and gained from mentorship for both mentee and mentor is priceless. To the question of disengagement, if we want to know how best to re-engage our most marginalized student populations (both boys and girls), foster the social/emotional well being of all students, and cultivate the potential to create a more equitable and just society, mentorship (both as a program and a pedagogical approach) offers many possibilities. In the case of my journey with the *Young Lions Mentorship Program*, the opportunity to build lasting relationships with some of our most marginalized boys has provided great insight into their challenges, fears, realities and ways of knowing; insights that are useful in considering what is necessary to effectively engage and meet the needs of all students. I equate this to the *universal design* approach taken in response to students with exceptionalities whereby the tools and supports implemented to support them are actually beneficial for all learners. So to do the practices important for underachieving and disengaged boys present approaches that will empower all students on their journey.

Beyond the *high yield strategies*[9] for student success, this concept of *love* for our boys is what I perceive as necessary for the academic success of underachieving boys, and the successful development of our boys into men whose understandings and actions build healthy and equitable families, communities and societies. As should be apparent, mentorship pedagogy and programs of the nature previously discussed are one possible way to achieve this end. Thus, mentorship goes beyond simply helping boys graduate from school or get to university. Sometimes it's about helping them to consider other ways of looking at, interacting with, and reflecting on what's happening for them in their neighbourhoods. It's about helping them to find a comfortable space – a space from which they can explore who they are, feel comfortable and confident in their skin, and use that confidence as strength to challenge the institutional barriers that confront them and their communities. Such opportunities are imperative, for in their absence, too many of our boys will continue to underachieve.

In closing, I thank my co-mentors for their support and guidance, and the members of the Young Lions for all they have shared and for the great insight they have given me into their lives, information that is used to enrich us, and that I hope will subsequently help to enlighten others regarding their reality. I am excited by the prospects that our future holds as the first *Young Lions'* alumni has now entered a faculty of education and is on his way to making his contribution to the community. Although it is a given that the outcome is never predictable, I believe that the possibilities for the achievement, engagement and advancement of our boys and their communities are endless through a mentorship approach which builds transformative relationships and induces the genius within us all.

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[9] The term ' high yield strategies' refers to some of the approaches adopted by many boards in Ontario as best practices (e.g. differentiated instruction and assessment, posting success criteria, etc.)

Although there are limits to mentorship in terms of some boys not wanting to connect with mentors, the cultural and social distance between mentor and mentee, and the potential for male mentors to re-inscribe traditional notions of masculinity, my experiences have offered something different. My observation is that mentorship, whether intentional or not, arises in some of the most unlikely ways. And, because we cannot control people seeing us as mentors, we have some responsibility to respond to youth who see us in this role (James in press). Particularly in the role of teacher, this position as mentor for the children we work with is inescapable and the responsibility is great. My goal in writing this article was to have us think critically about what this responsibility truly means for us as educators, and how we can best utilize our capacity as mentors to challenge existing structures which continue to marginalize some of our students and prevent them from realizing their true potential.

Thus, in closing I suggest the potential lies in the conception of mentorship not only as a transformative program, but as an anti-oppressive pedagogy of possibilities. For, it is beyond the traditional conception of mentor, to the more inclusive understanding of the impact of the teacher/mentor, that we open up the opportunities for more widespread transformation in the classroom.

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