*Article*

# Reciprocal Love: Mentoring Black and Latino Males Through an Ethos of Care

Urban Education
2014, Vol. 49(4) 394–417

DOI: 10.1177/0042085913519336
uex.sagepub.com
SAGE

**Iesha Jackson[1], Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz[1], and Wanda Watson[1]**

**Abstract**

Although mentoring programs can produce positive outcomes for youth, more research is needed that offers an account of how Black and Latino male mentors and mentees experience mentoring. This phenomenological study highlights the voices of a mentor and 14 Black and Latino males who are part of the Umoja Network for Young Men (UMOJA) an all-male, in-school mentoring program at an alternative high school that serves overage, under-credited students. We extend the concept of culturally responsive caring by examining notions of reciprocal love and an ethos of care that characterize the mentor's and mentees' discussions of their mentoring experiences.

**Keywords**

minority academic success, urban education, youth development, urban education, race, identity, high school, programs

In her lecture titled "Educators as 'Seed People' Growing a New Future," Lisa Delpit (2003) argued for an approach to educating children, particularly low-income students of color, that honors the intellect, humanity, and

[1]Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY, USA

**Corresponding Author:**
Iesha Jackson, Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W 120 St., Box 97, New York, NY 10027, USA.
Email: ij2142@tc.columbia.edu

spiritual nature of students who have typically been failed by the U.S. public education system. Such an approach does not compromise academic rigor and excellence; instead, both are achieved by educating children while believing in their abilities, respecting their communities and cultures, and developing meaningful relationships with them as individuals. As Delpit asserts,

> We *can* educate all children if we truly want to. To do so, we must first stop attempting to determine their capacity. We must be convinced of their inherent intellectual capability, humanity, and spiritual character . . . Finally, we must learn *who* our children are—their lived culture, their interests, and their intellectual, political, and historical legacies. (p. 20)

Although this type of academic engagement with students may be easier said than done, we argue that it is gaining traction in schools across the nation. Treating young people as seeds that require tending and viewing teachers as "seed people" whose responsibility is to till the "soil" (the school environment) so the seeds will grow can inspire educators to view their profession as a hopeful one that cultivates student potential. Duncan-Andrade (2009) sees hope-filled teachers as gardeners who nurture the soil and plant seeds in season, anticipating healthy crops. Because gardeners cannot control the weather or other challenges that can harm the seedlings, they embrace hope and optimism for a bountiful outcome. Likewise, teachers and school leaders must embrace hope and optimism to create academically enriching environments that recognize all students' cultural and social selves and help them flourish in both their academics and humanity.

Contrary to an image of hope and optimism, research on Black and Latino males continues to present an ever-widening opportunity gap (Milner, 2010) between these youth and their White and Asian peers. Issues affecting the opportunity gap are somewhat different for Black males when compared with Latino males. For example, Black male students are more likely than any other population to face discipline leading to suspension or expulsion (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Milner, 2013; Noguera, 2008). Sáenz and Ponjuan (2011) report that 49.5% of Black and 29.6% of Latino male students in Grades 6 to 12 were suspended from school. Studies have shown that many Black male students also experience high levels of stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and an increased likelihood for special education referral and placement (Jackson, 2012) compared with their peers. Research conducted by Thomas and Stevenson (2009) showed that when compared with their same-race female peers and White students, Black and Latino males are more often misdiagnosed and overrepresented in special education.

Most notably, they report that African American boys in special education (excluding gifted and talented programs) are more than twice their representation in the overall public school population. For Latino males, the high school graduation rate remains the lowest of all reported ethnic groups and genders (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Latino males who struggle academically often place an equal value on achievement across contexts, such as work experience and family involvement, in ways that go unrecognized or under-utilized in schools (Halx & Ortiz, 2011). Few studies (Flores-Gonzalez, 1999; Harper & Associates, 2014; Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008; Toldson & Lewis, 2012; Woolley, Kol, & Bowen, 2009) highlight the positive relationships Black and Latino males have with school. Research on this student population continues to be dominated by descriptions of oppositional behaviors and students' lack of positive social and academic adjustment in schools.

As a way to address some of the challenges Black and Latino males face in schools, school districts across the country have prioritized the academic, social, and emotional well-being of their Black and Latino male students. A recent example of a massive public education initiative in support of Black and Latino males is found in New York City. In 2011, New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg and philanthropist George Soros announced that they were donating US$200 million and redirecting another US$500 million of public funds to initiatives addressing the critical state of education for Black and Latino boys in New York City schools. Recently, programs such as the Empowering Boys Initiative and the Expanded Success Initiative have emerged. These programs focus specifically on increasing academic achievement and college-going rates among Black and Latino males, as well as developing their social-emotional skills and sense of well-being (Toldson, 2008). This is particularly important in New York where the graduation rate for both Black and Latino males is 37% (Jackson, 2012). New York City reports "the sixth largest Black-White male gap in four-year high school graduation rates among urban districts that enroll 10,000 or more Black male students" (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2012 as cited in Harper & Associates, 2014, p. 6). In light of a recent report by Harper and Associates (2014), which found Black and Latino males identified positive ideas about their school experiences such as how they wanted to do well in school and desired adults in their lives to have high expectations for them, it is important that these data and more studies like these penetrate the pervasive narrative about Black and Latino males not striving to do well or graduate from high school.

Given the myriad challenges facing Black and Latino males, our public schools need more adults who imagine themselves as seed people whose

purpose is to cultivate the academic, social, and emotional success of these young men. When educators attend to the intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth of Black and Latino male students, they are better positioned to maximize the development of the students in their charge (Delpit, 2003). Our study provides an example of what it looks like when an adult sees himself or herself as a gardener and the young men he or she works with as seeds with great potential. The purpose of this study was to examine how Black and Latino participants in the all-male, in-school mentoring program Umoja Network for Young Men (UMOJA) experienced their participation. The questions guiding this inquiry were as follows: (a) How do the young men and mentor, as participants, experience UMOJA? (b) Which features of the mentoring program most contribute to the academic, social, and emotional growth of the members?

## UMOJA and Mentoring Black and Latino Males

All-male, in-school mentoring programs can buttress the success of school- or district-level programs such as the Empowering Boys and Expanded Success initiatives. Literature on mentoring suggests that the presence of a structured program and caring adults who coach, sponsor, motivate, and/or serve as role models can positively influence the educational outcomes of their mentees (Evans, 2000). More than simply being an avenue for caring relationships to develop, school-based mentoring programs can nurture supportive relationships between adults and students (McPartland & Nettles, 1991; Randolph & Johnson, 2008). Mentoring can be understood as a one-to-one relationship in which a more experienced, often older mentor supports a less experienced, often younger mentee (Struchen & Porta, 1997; Thomson & Zand, 2010). These supportive relationships can create reciprocal exchanges of trust, respect, and commitment between a mentor and his or her mentees (Zellers, Howard, & Barcic, 2008).

Whereas some in-school programs exclusively focus on increasing academic achievement, others also aim for social inclusion and emotional well-being: UMOJA (present study); Project Avalanche (Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011); REAL: Respect, Excellence, Attitude, and Leadership (Hall, 2006); and the Brotherhood (Wyatt, 2009) are examples of school-based mentoring programs that are helping Black and Latino males successfully negotiate their school environments by establishing positive academic and social identities for themselves.

Organized in 2004 and operating in New York City, UMOJA is a high school–based mentoring program that focuses on the holistic development of young men in two alternative high schools. UMOJA deliberately focuses on

the academic success and the social and emotional well-being of its members. The young men who become members are overage, under-credited (OA/UC) transfer students from traditional high schools where they did not experience academic success. The OA/UC student population is defined as students who are at least 2 years behind their peers in age and credits earned toward a high school diploma (Cahill, Lynch, Hamilton, & New York City Department of Education, 2006). Their previous academic record causes them to feel unsuccessful in and disconnected from school (May & Copeland, 1998). UMOJA's founder and mentor view the group as a possible intervention to the high dropout rate prevalent in two alternative schools where UMOJA is present. Before they are admitted into UMOJA, students complete a member application, sit for a brief interview with the founder (who also serves as the mentor of the group), and are required to write a short essay explaining why they want to join. Many of these young men come to the group under-performing in crucial literacy skills; thus, one of the popular reasons for wanting to join the group is for academic assistance. Another common reason given for wanting to join UMOJA is the desire to find other males in the school who share participants' various social interests. To date, more than 75 young men who participated in UMOJA have successfully graduated high school and moved on to college.

Referring to his work in single-sex schools that serve Black and Latino males, Noguera (2012) confirms the importance of mentoring for young males of color. He writes,

> Our research in these schools showed us that strong, positive relationships between teachers and students are critical ingredients of their success. Equally important is the need to provide a personalized learning environment with mentors, counseling, and other supports that make it possible for schools to intervene early and effectively when problems arise.

Literature on school-based mentoring suggests that mentoring relationships is often a key element in the overall success of Black and Latino male students. However, the field has yet to substantively explore the influence of in-school mentoring relationships for Black and Latino high school students. Those who have (Hall, 2006; Wyatt, 2009) do not thoroughly explore the relationships through the lens of care (Alder, 2002). Moreover, the literature does not fully address the mentoring relationship from the students' perspectives in ways that account for how they understand the nature of mentoring and the programs they attend. This current study provides insight into how 14 Black and Latino males interacted with their mentor and each other, and how they experienced their school-based mentoring program. We found that a

distinct ethos of care encouraged the young men to bring their full selves—triumphs and challenges—to the mentoring space. This ethos of care manifested, among other features, a reciprocal love among the young men.

## Reciprocal Love and an Ethos of Care

We are defining reciprocal love as a deeply rooted interest in and concern for community that extends personal well-being to communal sustenance. This framing was developed through a combination of examining extant literature on care in schools, our data analysis, and our positionality as researchers. As three Black female educators whose experiences span all levels of education from elementary through post-secondary, we actively question and research ways to meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of students of color. We root our work in a strong belief in the power of love. Reciprocal love is an understanding that a love for the self is inextricably linked to a love for others; an acknowledgment that good ground produces good fruit, which in turn produces good seed to be sown in good ground in an endless cycle of regeneration. We define an ethos of care as an intangible spirit of personal interest in and responsibility for others. This ethos rests at the center of united communities that actively pursue the individual and collective well-being of their members. We use an ethos of care to acknowledge that for the community to flourish, individuals must recognize their interconnected relationships to one another. Stated differently, an ethos of care is rooted in an understanding that an individual's success can only be measured in relation to the success of his or her community.

These definitions provide us with a lens through which we make sense of our participants' education and growth far beyond academic standards. Specifically, we engage the definition of an ethos of care to push the discussion of care toward a more bidirectional view that highlights reciprocity. We discuss the ways in which the mentor and members of UMOJA established a sense of brotherhood and collective responsibility, trust and open dialogue, and a broadened sense of capacity and personal aspirations—all of which contributed to the participants' sense of the self and community. We assert that an ethos of care is a necessary component of strong mentoring programs that seek to support Black and Latino male students holistically. Furthermore, we believe that such an ethos can be cultivated in classrooms.

## Caring Relationships in Schools

In her influential work, *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education*, Noddings (2005) emphasizes an ethic of care that is

relational, involving a carer who initiates and builds connections with his or her students and a cared-for party who is responsive to and accepting of such caring. She distinguishes this ethic of care from a virtue of care in which the carer determines what is best for the cared for. The carer either uses an authentic form of caring in which he or she strives to better understand students personally and culturally or an aesthetic form of care that prioritizes concepts and objects over people (Noddings; as cited in Valenzuela, 1999). Such work helps one begin to understand the dynamics of caring relationships and how care can be used effectively in ways that affect student motivation. However, these conceptions have been critiqued for not adequately addressing issues of social justice (Card, 1990), being colorblind and emotion-laden (Thompson, as cited in Antrop-González & De Jesús, 2006), and for espousing a unidirectional view of caring in which reciprocity amounts to acknowledging another's caring (Hoagland, 1990). More recently, scholars have applied notions of care in the education of Black and Latino students (Garza, 2009; Gay, 2010; Howard, 2008) to examine issues of student engagement, academic achievement, and student perceptions of schooling.

## *Culturally Responsive Caring*

Culturally responsive caring can be characterized as a holistic approach to understanding students personally and academically (Gay, 2010). Teachers who engage in culturally responsive caring foster relationships with students that encourage them to develop confidence, pride, a sense of responsibility, and critical consciousness. In practice, teachers who exhibit culturally responsive caring provide academically demanding learning experiences in a supportive and encouraging environment.

Gay cites Valenzuela (1999) to argue that authentic caring must be culturally appropriate for the student. The goal of such caring is to help ethnically diverse students not only excel academically but also contribute to a more caring, humane society. From this perspective, educators consider the social and interdependent nature of ensuring that students develop a sense of moral, social, and personal responsibility. Teachers who enact such culturally responsive caring often play the role of counselor, encourager, benefactor, and racial cheerleader to meet the needs of the whole student community (Siddle Walker & Tompkins, 2004). Such educators may be described as "warm demanders" (Vasquez, 1988) who go beyond their immediate duties to build relationships with youth, maintain high expectations, and validate students as intelligent, cultural beings (Delpit, 2012; Haddix, 2010; Sealey-Ruiz & Greene, 2011). The concept of culturally responsive caring is significant in highlighting the sociological and human factors that contribute to the

social and academic success of youth. This articulation of caring is salient to our understanding of mentoring relationships because it allows for an examination of ways race/ethnicity and gender mediate how care is enacted and received by our participants. Even so, this framework of care is essentially unidirectional and does not fully capture the dynamic and complex ways in which a community of students can share the roles of carer and cared for.

## Conducting the Study

During the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 academic years, members of UMOJA met twice a week; once with their mentor Craig for family group, and on a second day with Craig, and the second author for the UMOJA Readers and Writers (URW) English class. Given the unique nature of the context constructed by the participants, a qualitative method of phenomenology (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) was used in this study to examine how the young men and their mentor experienced UMOJA during the 2 years of the study. This approach to qualitative research supports the researcher in describing "what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71), and pushes the researcher to seek the underlying meaning (Creswell, 2009) of how participants discuss their experiences. The primary sources of data included observational field notes of UMOJA family group sessions, participant observations from the second author's class at the school, and focus group interviews that provided a rich resource of data from multiple participants simultaneously (Creswell, 2009).

### *Setting*

The Sunset Hills Academy network of schools has been in existence for 30 years and serves more than 1,300 students who did not experience academic success in their previous high schools. Sunset Hills is often a student's last chance to successfully complete high school before turning to the General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Sunset Hills Academy High East (SHAE) and Sunset Hills Academy West (SHAW) campuses are located in New York. As alternative schools, SHAE and SHAW are small communities with less than 300 students each. The schools operate according to the state's Common Core standards for high school completion. However, as an alternative school, students in the Sunset Hills Academy network are still allowed to present portfolio-based assessments (PBAs) in place of taking Regents examinations to graduate. The administrators of the Sunset Hills Academy network believe that alternative high school students are more successful at researching and presenting their work than being held to one assessment of a standardized exam.

**Table 1.** Participants.

| Participant name | UMOJA school location | Age of participant | Race/ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|
| AJ | SHAW | 18 | Black |
| Andres | SHAE | 16 | Dominican |
| Antonio | SHAW | 17 | Black |
| Carlos | SHAW | 19 | Puerto Rican |
| Donte | SHAE | 19 | Black |
| Geno | SHAE | 18 | Puerto Rican |
| Johnny | SHAE | 17 | Puerto Rican |
| Joseph | SHAW | 17 | Black |
| Mario | SHAE | 18 | Mexican |
| Matthew | SHAE | 17 | Dominican |
| Melo | SHAW | 17 | Puerto Rican |
| Randy | SHAE | 20 | Black |
| Richie | SHAE | 17 | Black |
| Rodney | SHAW | 18 | Black |

*Note.* SHAE = Sunset Hills Academy High East; SHAW = Sunset Hills Academy West.

## *Participants*

Black and Latino male participants ($N = 14$; see Table 1) self-identified as Latino (Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Mexican) and Black on the UMOJA student application. The mentor self-identified as Black several times to the researcher over the 2 years of the study. The participants (all names are pseudonyms) attended either SHAE or SHAW, alternative high schools that serve mostly OA/UC Black and Latino students.

## *Researchers' Roles*

Each author was involved in the data collection and analysis for this research project. The second author, who is a tenure-track professor, is the creator and co-teacher (with the first author) of the URW class. Her role at the school was one of teacher, mentor, and friend to the faculty of SHAE as well as the students she worked with. As the second author ascribes to principals of mentoring and carries this out in her daily work, the first and third author were invited to participate in this project and co-author an article about our experiences in doing this work, as well as share documentation on the work done with the young men of UMOJA and their mentor. Over the 3 years of the study, two focus groups were conducted by the second author, and one focus group was co-led by the first and second authors. The second author played

an instrumental role in planning and assisting two annual conferences for the young men of UMOJA. In addition, the authors shared responsibility in coding the data, performing interrater reliability readings, and discussing significant insights into the data based on questions that arose during the analysis process. In essence, the data collection, analysis, and production of this article are examples of mentoring that the second author practices with doctoral students with whom she works.

## Data Collection

Data for this study were derived from field observations over 2 academic years (2009-2010 and 2010-2011) and from three focus groups held over the 2-year study. The second author kept detailed observation notes from the UMOJA family group sessions she attended and from her URW classes at SHAW (2009-2010) and SHAE (2010-2011). The three semi-structured focus group interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) held with the 14 members were conducted in June 2010 (at SHAW) and in June 2011 (at SHAE). Focus groups were held for 2 hr, during regular class time for UMOJA or URW. The researcher began the focus groups by asking questions about the participants' high school experiences, and then moved to questions about their experience with UMOJA.

## Data Analysis

A phenomenological approach allowed us to explore the experiences of the participants in the mentoring program. The primary researcher transcribed verbatim the audiotapes and emailed the transcripts to the other authors. We were able to examine the transcripts for significant statements related to the "essence" of the participants' experiences in UMOJA (Creswell, 2013). All three authors reviewed the interview transcripts to determine horizontalization or the important quotes that helped us understand how the participants experienced the mentoring program (Moustakas, 1994). We used these statements to determine clusters of meaning that ultimately became the themes for the study (Moustakas, 1994). The three authors compared and discussed the list of themes and selected those that appeared on all three lists (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). These initial themes were recoded for confirmation throughout the transcripts by the first and third authors of this article. This process led to the themes of (a) brotherhood and collective responsibility, (b) trust and open dialogue, and (c) a broadened sense of capacity and personal aspirations. During an in-person meeting, all three authors agreed on and

established the notions of reciprocal love and an ethos of care that aptly described the three major findings of this study. During member check sessions conducted in-person by the second author, the participants were provided with a copy of the emerging themes from their focus group discussions. These sessions were held with the SHAW group during the final URW meeting in late June 2010 and with the SHAE group during late June 2011. At the sessions, the second author asked clarifying questions and encouraged the participants to ask any questions about the emerging themes. Member checks were conducted to ensure that the participants' ideas and comments were accurately summarized. The young men agreed with the themes as they are presented in this article.

## Findings

Umoja, Kiswahili for unity, is a term that was actualized in the way the mentoring program operated. There was a distinct essence of unity, safety, and care shown during UMOJA family group sessions and URW classes at both school sites. Craig, the founder and mentor, was explicit in addressing the young men as his "little brothers" during family group sessions and conversation with his colleagues at both school sites. The ways in which Craig and the UMOJA brothers experienced the program contribute a much-needed discourse that recognizes the centrality of relationship building among men of color in education. The participants in this study demonstrated reciprocal love; that is, they openly expressed love and care for their mentor and each other, and in turn, were being loved and cared for. The data indicated several ways in which reciprocal love and an ethos of care contributed to how the participants viewed themselves, the education at their school site, and their mentoring experiences.

### *Brotherhood and Collective Responsibility*

One fundamental aspect of an ethos of care can be characterized as a collective responsibility for all individuals involved. This was illustrated by the program's emphasis on togetherness. The tone for such a familial experience within the UMOJA mentoring program was captured by Craig, UMOJA's founder: "One thing I realized about having little brothers, you don't let people abuse them. You don't let people do anything to them that's going to cause them all harm" (Interview, June 13, 2011). These elements of caring for your brother and a sense of oneness were highlighted in the reflections of several participants. As Richie, one of the participants, explained,

> To be a brother in UMOJA is like to be *one* (italics added), to come together as one, to communicate, to share thoughts and feelings, and to learn . . . Like Craig, the found[er] of UMOJA, even though it was only a year ago, but it felt like we knew each other for so long and it's like we connected, like we came together as one, and basically taught us what a brotherhood should really be. You know, support each other and just be there, you know, don't let anybody down, you know. (Interview, June 7, 2010)

Richie and other participants' accounts of oneness provide a glimpse into UMOJA as a counter-space existing within the inescapable cultural fabric of public education in America (Boykin, 1994) that too often positions male students of color as a problem (Howard, 2013) and in constant conflict with one another (Noguera, 1995). Within the confines of UMOJA, participants experienced being cared for in a manner that validated their lived experiences and fostered a sense of intimacy and unity that does not typically occur for Black and Latino male students in public schools.

The feelings of unity and collective responsibility experienced by the members of UMOJA were exemplified in the way the young men viewed one another as brothers and felt responsible for each other's school success and emotional well-being. During family group sessions, Craig repeatedly reminded the group, "there are no excuses for any of you failing. Geno, if you and Johnny are in the same class and you're passing, then he shouldn't be failing. Remember fellas, you are your brother's keeper." This type of repetitive discourse strengthened their communal bond. This is particularly significant because Black and Latino males are often portrayed as emotionally detached, lazy, and/or without proper social supports (Brown, 2011; Campos, 2013; Yosso, 2002). The bonds that were formed in UMOJA helped the participants increase their feeling of inclusion in the school site and the responsibility they felt toward each other. Through their willingness to share deeply personal feelings and experiences with one another, the young men decoupled the emotional from the feminine; they cared for and received care from each other in a culturally appropriate and gendered cypher. An example of this was evident when Carlos, a member of UMOJA SHAW, explained,

> We should encourage each other to get to . . . a better place and, and just, build, build, build up on each other's energy. Like if I see . . . AJ . . . I'm going to feed off his energy and I'm going to want to do the same. Same thing with Rodney, same thing with Matthew, same thing with Melo. Like I feed off everybody's energy. Like if all of my brothers are doing good, then I'm doing good. That's how it is. (Interview, June 4, 2010)

Demonstrating what it is like to "feed off one another's energy," AJ, in the same interview, added,

> Like Carlos said, if one of us is hitting a downfall or you see them or if he can see me slacking, then he will approach me about it and I can actually pick up the pace. And I never saw, I never saw like any type of motivation ever, you know . . . And I learned that *one* (italics added) doesn't have to be just you. One can be like all of us intertwined as one. (Interview, June 4, 2010)

An ethos of care developed as participants' ways of knowing and being were honored and affirmed in an iterative process of being cared for and caring for others. The shift from a personal "one" to a communal "one" helped frame a bidirectional understanding of care that members of UMOJA exemplified.

An ethos of care in the UMOJA brotherhood was made possible by the sense of responsibility that Craig cultivated in the group. Generally, caring relationships in school center on student-teacher interactions (Bondy, Ross, Hambacher, & Acosta, 2013; Shevalier & McKenzie, 2012). Yet, Craig's role as mentor, enacted with an emphasis on love and service, transcended traditional notions of classroom interactions rooted in care. On several occasions, Craig explicitly stated how much he loved the young men and saw them as little brothers whom he should protect. "You can't choose your biological family, it's true," Craig shared during one of the focus groups, "but I feel special in that I get to choose these little brothers." During a UMOJA family group session at SHAE, Craig said to the young men, "Yes, I can truly say that y'all get on my nerves at times and push my buttons, but I love y'all." Almost immediately, Andres responded with a smile and laughter, "Awwww, we love you too, C!" In the context of UMOJA, traditional classroom power dynamics of adult/carer/authority and student/cared for/subordinate were minimized. The reciprocal nature of Craig's relationship with the young men seemed to bridge the chasm of power (Ferguson, 2000) that normally separates youth from adults. Craig's view of himself as "big brother" rather than father figure positioned him as a contributing member of the group as opposed to a facilitator. Craig and the brothers became each other's counsel, sharing struggles and frustration with many of the policies in the school. The young men viewed their UMOJA family group sessions as a time to talk and write about how they were feeling, and what they were struggling with at school and home. The sessions became a safe space to seek advice about how to deal with a teacher they perceived to be racist or sexist, a problem at home or in their relationships with a female. These conversations were critical, particularly those that involved conflicts with teachers. Craig observed that usually when students could not resolve conflicts with teachers they often decided not to return to class and avoid the teacher altogether. Love in the ways participants discussed it, became a generative force of interpersonal commitment. Craig emphasized their duty to "look out for one another in school and on the streets" as a way to show love for their brothers.

## *Trust and Open Dialogue*

The high level of trust established among the members led to open dialogue. Discussions during family group sessions contributed to the ethos of care and laid the foundation for honest communication about topics considered too personal to share in other classroom settings. One approach toward building relationships and making space for what Geno called "real talk" was through the use of free-writing activities that encouraged students to write down whatever was on their minds. After 5 min of writing, students shared what they wrote with the group. Often the conversations that followed were deeply personal. These conversations provided an opportunity for the participants to build and nurture friendships while gaining self-knowledge, a deeper sense of personal identity and increased self-esteem—all features of culturally responsive caring (Gay, 2010) consistent with an ethos of care. In a focus group interview, Johnny admitted,

> I'm not the type of person that shares my feelings, and like to talk to other people [about] what's going on in my life. I'm not that type of dude, all right. But with [UMOJA members] I feel comfortable and I feel like, it's like I told Craig last week, I feel like when I talk these people listen and they give me good advice . . . I just feel like we trust each other, you know. We can talk when we need to talk, and we, we gain a whole lot of respect. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Respect is generally understood as a fundamental element of relationships among Black and Latino men (DeGruy, Kjellstrand, Briggs, & Brennan, 2012; Halx & Ortiz, 2011). Johnny and his UMOJA brothers shared their feelings with each other without feeling emasculated. To the contrary, the vulnerability that participants displayed fostered a deep level of intra- and interpersonal respect. Andres, the youngest participant in UMOJA SHAE, was clear about what UMOJA meant to him:

> Being a part of UMOJA you get an idea of what it feels like to be respected as a man of color. I feel like I am on the same level as the brothers even though I am the youngest in the group. It makes me feel special to be the youngest. Makes me feel like I got big brothers who love me and are looking out for me. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Andres' comments highlight the importance that he places on respect. UMOJA provided a space where it was possible to understand and view respect in different ways. Sharing personal experiences and feelings required a tremendous amount of trust. The participants discussed the importance of developing trust in the group as being one of the most salient differences between UMOJA and other classroom settings. For example, Geno shared,

> It's about trust. Trust and love. I share some things with the U's that I don't even share with my real family. UMOJA is like real family. You have to trust people first before you open up to them. It's crazy 'cause people don't expect us to talk about trust and love, and all those things, but we do. They don't expect it, but we do.

Geno articulates a dissonance between the expectations for Black and Latino male students held by others compared with what they know to be true. For example, most teachers at SHAE and SHAW did not expect Black and Latino males to respond positively to discussions about trust or love. However, when members of UMOJA engaged in such discussions, participants like Geno openly shared intimate feelings and encouraged fellow UMOJA brothers to do the same. Although the process of sharing personal information and feelings with others was initially uncomfortable, after a few weeks together, the young men recognized that they could create a space for genuine mutual caring and trusting relationships. The young men of UMOJA engaged their critical consciousness by sharing personal experiences and engaging in dialectic conversations about what their experiences meant for them individually and as members of Black and Latino communities. As Mario stated, "So it wasn't like I had to, but it was kind of like [I] opened up. It made me more open-minded" (Interview, June 13, 2011). All of the participants engaged in a reciprocal relationship of talking, listening, and offering advice. In this way, the caring relationships established and maintained in UMOJA allowed participants from various Black and Latino cultural backgrounds to challenge dominant understandings of acceptable expressions of masculinity.

### *Broadened Sense of Capacity and Personal Aspirations*

Through their participation in UMOJA, Craig and the mentees recognized their individual and collective strengths, which influenced their sense of what they could accomplish in life. This recognition is significant given the often dehumanizing nature of schooling in which students of color, particularly Black and Latino males, experience a diminishing self-concept early in the public education process and begin to be stripped of humanity as they are ignored by the curriculum, instruction, and culture of schooling (Brock, 2005). An ethos of care that centers on interconnected relationships as well as students' personal cultures, interests, and capabilities can restore a sense of humanity among Black and Latino male students who have been emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually broken by the lack of care for them in schools.

In UMOJA, individual contributions are honored; this builds confidence in the young men's capacities. Mario expressed this sentiment when he

shared, "Like each of us has something to bring to the group. By adding more people, that's how we make it all work" (Interview, June 13, 2011). Craig added, "in order to benefit from a group like UMOJA, everybody has to know their place because it's not our weaknesses that divide us; it's really our strengths that bring us together" (Interview, June 4, 2010). Having the UMOJA community's support helped solidify an individual member's recognition of his or her own strengths. Possessing a strong sense of one's potential works in tandem with developing positive personal aspirations. The ethos of care present in UMOJA family group sessions affected the participants' aspirations in numerous ways, ranging from social and emotional to academic. Melo described how he shifted in his thinking about himself and his future to consider how to "become a better man." He realized that since his time in UMOJA, he had "learned how to become more respectful, and responsible" (Interview, June 4, 2010). Despite the fact that Black and Latino male students are stereotypically regarded as lazy, low achievers, and/or dangerous in school settings (Luna, Evans, & Davis, 2013; Strayhorn, 2009), these young men desired to become more than they had previously imagined for themselves and found an environment in UMOJA that would support their efforts. An example of this is in Mario's description of his personal goals. He noted,

> Me, I went from not knowing who I was— wanting to be like I said, the guy in the street getting the respect . . . to wanting to go to college to wanting to have a better future. Like every one of us, even [Craig], brings out stuff. Like each one of us has something to bring to the group. I can't explain how grateful I am that Craig introduced you [second author] to us and I met you . . . It's like, it felt great to just know that if I really want to go hard in college I know like, and I could talk to you whether for a letter of recommendation to whatever. Like, I know I got some type of like back-up. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Similarly, Matthew described his motivation to plan for his future:

> I'm actually planning my future now. Before I had the plans but I wasn't doing anything to get my plans solved. And now that I have the motivation like I could actually say that I'm moving towards making my father proud. I'm actually moving towards being one of the graduates, I want to go to college, go to military, actually, do something with [my] life. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

The desire to do something with their lives encouraged the young men to perform better in school. They had the added benefit of a support system with adult and peer mentors on whom they could count. Not only did the participants describe a shift in goals and approaches to achieving them, they also emphasized the responsibility they felt to their communities, which spoke to

their belief in collective achievement and responsibility (Hucks, 2011). UMOJA's ethos of care taught these young men what it means to be seed people (Delpit, 2003) spreading hope and optimism to those around them. An illustration of this is articulated by Geno:

> Now I'm saying it with meaning like, I want to go to college. Whatever I become, like I'm still thinking about that, but whatever it is I know I'm going to do something and that feeling that I want to be a man that people, as soon as you mention off the bat, "Yeah, I know him." like, "Oh yeah, he's a powerful person . . . " If ever I become something big, I'm not going to forget where I came from and the people that was there for me. I want to give back to where I came from. (Interview, June 13, 2011)

Geno's desire to give back extends from the ethos of care, an intangible spirit of personal interest in and responsibility for others, cultivated in the UMOJA mentoring program. The importance of unity and community was not limited to participants' membership in UMOJA; the young men articulated a connection to their broader community. These young men learned the importance of becoming seed people or individuals whose labor nourishes the humanity of those around them. This kind of learning, that which feeds the spirit as well as the intellect, does not often take place in schools for Black and Latino males.

The experiences in UMOJA inspired the young men to aspire beyond earning street credit as a means of respect to carrying themselves as respectable men and giving to others as a definition of success. Such learning has a lasting impact. For instance, Johnny, who announced he was moving to another state to finish his high school diploma, reflected on the impact UMOJA had on his decision to move:

> UMOJA has helped me see that I need more in my life. I need to get my diploma, and even though the U's is strong in my life, if I stay here I know I won't graduate. I need a change of pace. I need a fresh start. But I'm gonna take my UMOJA brothers with me. I take the U's with me right here. (Johnny softly pounds his fist over his heart; Interview, June 13, 2011)

The stories of the young men of UMOJA emphasize an important aspect of the metaphor of gardening: A community, enriched by an ethos of care, contributes to the growth of seed people. Many participants expressed a desire to share what they learned in the program with the other people in their lives; they articulated a commitment to brotherhood beyond the borders of UMOJA. They connected their broadened personal aspirations to a sense of leadership through purpose and integrity. The members of UMOJA began to

see themselves as part of a community that loves, cares for, and relies on one another to grow and remain productive beings.

## Conclusions and Implications

This study demonstrates the ways in which a mentoring program, through an ethos of care, has the potential to reproduce itself, leading mentees to become mentors and role models in other settings. For Black and Latino male students who are often criminalized and victimized by harmful stereotypes of their raced and gendered beings (Dance, 2002; Ladson Billings, 2011; Rios, 2011), encountering reciprocal love in a caring environment can be a restorative, healing, educative experience. The ethos of care experienced in UMOJA helped the young men shape a positive disposition toward life that was already present within them but went uncultivated in other classroom spaces. Carlos summed up the impact UMOJA was having on his life when he affirmed the program's motto by saying, "I learned to live with a purpose, learn with morals, and lead with integrity" (Interview, June 14, 2010). Donte, who had been with UMOJA SHAE for 2 years and was a graduating senior, shared his epiphany around the importance of collective responsibility: "I am realizing that it's not just about me anymore, and even about us U's. It's bigger—it's my family, my 'hood, my connection to others in this world. I wanna be that one who makes a positive difference." The 14 students in this study remained part of UMOJA until they graduated or transferred to another state. These young men demonstrated a commitment to themselves, one another, and their education that reflects reciprocal love. When they shared experiences around personal growth, brotherhood, and community, the young men and Craig were direct about the love they had for one another and how participating in UMOJA made them want to be better men.

The nature of relationship building will differ across mentoring programs, and there is no extant formula for accomplishing this work. One must keep in mind how each mentoring program will be affected by school culture, geographic region, funding, and initiatives at the school, district, or state level that exist to support students. UMOJA has operated in two alternative schools, and recently, Craig has been recruited by a local university to create a UMOJA program with two of their partnership schools. Despite this, it is highly suggested that schools build mentoring programs for all students, particularly Black and Latino males, with an ethos of care as a guiding principle. This study reveals the importance of developing a sense of unity, trust, and open dialogue while upholding a belief in students' capacities as a starting place for cultivating reciprocal love. Love and trust cannot be forced—they ultimately require a deep respect for the humanity and well-being of others.

Centering notions of reciprocal love in school-based mentoring programs extends the discourse of care prevalent in education research relevant to all students. Through such an expansion, accountability in education can shift from a singular emphasis on meeting bureaucratic demands to a genuine collective responsibility for ensuring that youth have access to a democratic learning experience (Biesta, 2004). Currently, such a democratic education only exists in pockets where an intentional community has been established that recognizes youths' humanity and spiritual nature as much as their intellectual capacity (Delpit, 2003). UMOJA exists as an intentional mentoring community that, through an ethos of care, has been able to affirm the humanity of its members and increase their potential for affecting broader communities.

This study contributes to the dearth of research that presents Black and Latino male youth as people who love and care for one another. As we have highlighted, there is an abundance of research that speaks to the disengagement and violence Black and Latino males experience in school. This study disrupts that representation. It is crucial that researchers listen to the voices of Black and Latino youth who participate in in-school mentoring programs to help them understand ways in which these young men relate to school, their mentors, and each other. The authors believe that an ethos of care and the positive impact it can have on the social, emotional, and academic well-being of Black and Latino youth are considerably under-theorized in educational research and invite further explorations of reciprocal love in school-based programs. Additional studies are needed to examine the lasting influence of such school-based programs. Future research might also explore what happens when students who experience an ethos of care and reciprocal love in school-based programs leave the safety of the program's setting.

The viewpoints of the young men of UMOJA should be carefully considered especially given the negative discourse around Black and Latino males' abilities and interest in leading productive lives. The participants in this study repeatedly articulated the impact of an ethos of care on their interpersonal relationships, desires, and academic and life goals. Unfortunately, much research and policy centered on teacher quality ignore the important role of care (Irvine & Fraser, 1998). The insights from this study's participants remind all who work with Black and Latino males that educating them transcends standards and curricula; their education requires positive relationships and an ethos of care through which they can connect. While educators, researchers, and policymakers continue to seek solutions to complex educational dilemmas involving Black and Latino males, the participants in this study remind us that one solution is to re-center the roles reciprocal love and care play in creating optimal learning spaces.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## References

Alder, N. (2002). Interpretations of the meaning of care: Creating caring relationships in urban middle school classrooms. *Urban Education*, *37*, 241-266.

Antrop-González, R., & De Jesús, A. (2006). Toward a theory of critical care in urban small school reform: Examining structures and pedagogies of caring in two Latino community-based schools. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *19*, 409-433.

Biesta, G. J. J. (2004). Education, accountability, and the ethical demand: Can the democratic potential of accountability be regained? *Educational Theory*, *54*, 233-250.

Bogdan, R. C., & Biklen, S. K. (2007). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theories and methods*. Boston, MA: Pearson.

Bondy, E., Ross, D. D., Hambacher, E., & Acosta, M. (2013). Becoming warm demanders: Perspectives and practices of first year teachers. *Urban Education*, *48*, 420-450.

Boykin, A. W. (1994). Afrocultural expression and its implications for schooling. In E. R. Hollins, J. E. King, & W. C. Hayman (Eds.), *Teaching diverse populations: Formulating a knowledge base* (pp. 243-256). Albany: State University of New York Press.

Brock, R. (2005). *Sista talk: The personal and the pedagogical*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.

Brown, A. L. (2011). Racialised subjectivities: a critical examination of ethnography on Black males in the USA, 1960s to early 2000s. *Ethnography and Education*, *6*, 45-60.

Cahill, M., Lynch, J., Hamilton, L., & New York City Department of Education (2006). *New York City DOE: Multiple pathways strategy summary findings*. Retrieved from http://schools.nyc.gov/NR/rdonlyres/B5EC6D1C-F88A-4610-8F0F-a14D63420115/0/FindingsofOMPG.pdf

Campos, D. (2013). *Educating latino boys: An asset-based approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Card, C. (1990). Caring and evil. *Hypatia*, *5*, 101-108.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Dance, L. J. (2002). *Tough fronts: The impact of street culture on schooling*. New York, NY: Routledge.

DeGruy, J., Kjellstrand, J. M., Briggs, H. E., & Brennan, E. M. (2012). Racial respect and racial socialization as protective factors for African American male youth. *Journal of Black Psychology*, *38*, 395-420.

Delpit, L. (2003). Educators as "seed people" growing a new future. *Educational Researcher*, *32*(7), 14-21.

Delpit, L. (2012). *"Multiplication is for white people": Raising expectations for other people's children*. New York, NY: New Press.

Duncan-Andrade, J. M. R. (2009). Note to educators: Hope required when growing roses in concrete. *Harvard Educational Review*, *79*, 181-194.

Evans, T. W. (2000). The new mentors. *Teachers College Record*, *102*, 244-263.

Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Flores-Gonzalez, N. (1999). Puerto Rican high achievers: An example of ethnic and academic identity compatibility. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *30*, 343-362.

Garza, R. (2009). Latino and White high school students' perceptions of caring behaviors are we culturally responsive to our students? *Urban Education*, *44*, 297-321.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gregory, A., Skiba, R., & Noguera, P. A. (2010). The achievement gap and the discipline gap: Two sides of the same coin? *Educational Researcher*, *39*, 59-68.

Haddix, M. (2010). No longer on the margins: Researching the hybrid literate identities of Black and Latina preservice teachers. *Research in the Teaching of English*, *45*, 97-123.

Hall, H. R. (2006). *Mentoring young men of color: Meeting the needs of African American and Latino students*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Education.

Halx, M. D., & Ortiz, M. (2011). Voices of Latino male high school students on their disconnect with education: Perspectives of "drop-outs" and those on the brink. *Latino Studies*, *9*, 416-438.

Harper, S. R., & Associates. (2014). *Succeeding in the city: A report from the New York city Black and Latino male high school achievement study*. Philadelphia: Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education, University of Pennsylvania.

Hoagland, S. L. (1990). Some concerns about Nel Noddings' caring. *Hypatia*, *5*, 109-114.

Howard, T. C. (2008). "Who really cares?" The disenfranchisement of African American males in PreK-12 schools: A critical race theory perspective. *Teachers College Record*, *110*, 954-985.

Howard, T. C. (2013). How does it feel to be a problem? Black male students, schools, and learning in enhancing the knowledge base to disrupt deficit frameworks. *Review of Research in Education*, *37*, 54-86.

Hucks, D. C. (2011). New visions of collective achievement: The cross-generational schooling experiences of African American males. *The Journal of Negro Education*, *80*, 339-357.

Irvine, J. J., & Fraser, J. W. (1998, May 13). Warm demanders. *Education Week*, *17*(35), 56.

Jackson, J. H. (2012). *The urgency of now: The Schott 50-state report on public education and Black males*. Cambridge, MA: Schott Foundation for Public Education.

Ladson Billings, G. (2011). Boyz to men? Teaching to restore Black boys' childhood. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *14*, 7-15.

Lewis, C., James, M., Hancock, S., & Hill-Jackson, V. (2008). Framing African American students' success and failure in urban settings: A typology for change. *Urban Education*, *43*, 127-153.

Luna, N., Evans, W. P., & Davis, B. (2013). Indigenous Mexican culture, identity and academic aspirations: Results from a community-based curriculum project for Latina/Latino students. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *2*, 1-22.

May, H. E., & Copeland, E. P. (1998). Academic persistence and alternative high schools: Student and site characteristics. *The High School Journal*, *81*, 199-208.

Maykut, P., & Morehouse, R. (1994). *Beginning qualitative research: A philosophical and practical guide*. New York, NY: Routledge.

McPartland, J. M., & Nettles, S. M. (1991). Using community adults as advocates or mentors for at-risk middle school students: A two-year evaluation of Project RAISE. *American Journal of Education*, *99*, 568-586.

Milner, R. H. (2010). *Start where you are, but don't stay there: Understanding diversity, opportunity gaps, and teaching in today's classrooms*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Milner, R. H. (2013). Why are students of color (still) punished more severely and frequently than White students? *Urban Education*, *48*, 483-489.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research method*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Noddings, N. (2005). *The challenge to care in schools: An alternative approach to education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Noguera, P. A. (1995). Preventing and producing violence: A critical analysis of responses to school violence. *Harvard Educational Review*, *65*, 189-213.

Noguera, P. A. (2008). *The trouble with Black boys: And other reflections on race, equity, and the future of public education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Noguera, P. A. (2012). Saving Black and Latino boys. *Phi Delta Kappan, 30*(20). Retrieved from http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2012/02/03/kappan_noguera.html

Patton, M. Q. (1990). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

Randolph, K. A., & Johnson, J. L. (2008). School-based mentoring programs: A review of the research. *Children & Schools*, *30*, 177-185.

Rios, V., Jr. (2011). *Punished: Policing the lives of black and Latino boys*. New York: New York University Press.

Sáenz, V. B., & Ponjuan, L. (2011). *Ensuring the academic success of Latino males in higher education*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Sealey-Ruiz, Y., & Greene, P. E. (2011). Embracing urban youth culture in the context of education. *The Urban Review*, *43*, 339-357.

Shevalier, R., & McKenzie, B. A. (2012). Culturally responsive teaching as an ethics- and care-based approach to urban education. *Urban Education*, *47*, 1086-1105.

Siddle Walker, V., & Tompkins, R. H. (2004). Caring in the past: The case of a Southern segregated African American school. In V. Siddle Walker & J. R. Snarey (Eds.), *Racing moral formation: African American perspectives on care and justice* (pp. 77-92). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Steele, C. M., & Aronson, J. (1995). Stereotype threat and the intellectual test performance of African Americans. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *69*, 797-811.

Strayhorn, T. L. (2009). Different folks, different hopes: The educational aspirations of Black males in urban, suburban, and rural high schools. *Urban Education*, *44*, 710-731.

Struchen, W., & Porta, M. (1997). From role-modeling to mentoring for African American youth: Ingredients for successful relationships. *Preventing School Failure*, *41*, 119-123.

Thomas, D. E., & Stevenson, H. (2009). Gender risks and education: The particular classroom challenges for urban low-income African American boys. *Review of Research in Education*, *33*, 160-180.

Thomson, N. R., & Zand, D. H. (2010). Mentee's perceptions of their interpersonal relationships. *Youth & Society*, *41*, 434-445.

Toldson, I. A. (2008). *Breaking barriers: Plotting the path to academic success for school-age African-American males*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

Toldson, I. A., & Lewis, C. W. (2012). *Challenge the status quo: Academic success among school-age African American males*. Washington, DC: Congressional Black Caucus Foundation.

U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2012). *The condition of education 2012*. Retrieved from http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d11/tables/dt11_116.asp

Valenzuela, A. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U.S.-Mexican youth and the politics of caring*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Vasquez, J. A. (1988). Contexts of learning for minority students. *Educational Forum*, *52*, 243-253.

Woolley, M. E., Kol, K. L., & Bowen, G. L. (2009). The social context of school success for Latino middle school students' direct and indirect influences of teachers, family, and friends. *The Journal of Early Adolescence*, *29*, 43-70.

Wyatt, S. (2009). The brotherhood: Empowering adolescent African-American males toward excellence. *Professional School Counseling*, *12*, 463-470.

Yosso, T. J. (2002). Critical race media literacy: Challenging deficit discourse about Chicanas/os. *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *30*, 52-62.

Zellers, F. D., Howard, M. V., & Barcic, A. M. (2008). Faculty mentoring programs: Reenvisioning rather than reinventing the wheel. *Review of Educational Research*, *78*, 552-588.

## Author Biographies

**Iesha Jackson** is a doctoral candidate and adjunct instructor at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research interests include examining means of improving educational and social outcomes for students of color. Her dissertation analyzes the intersections of race, gender, and age in the schooling experiences of overage, undercredited African American high school students.

**Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz** is an Assistant Professor of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Her research includes racial literacy development for urban teachers, the social and academic success of Black and Latino male students, and culturally responsive pedagogies.

**Wanda Watson** is a doctoral candidate at Teachers College, Columbia University and full-time instructor at Long Island University. Her research interests involve social justice education, critical inclusive education, youth activism, and the intersections of race, class, gender, and education.