



time to bloom

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time to bloom

by freeden oeur

In the United States today, single-sex classrooms and schools are increasingly making their way into public schools. Nationally, about 560 K-12 public schools offer some single-sex academic classrooms, and about 80 more are entirely separated by sex.

Debates over single-sex schooling usually center on questions of gender equity. Supporters claim that they accommodate boys' and girls' different learning styles; critics charge that they perpetuate gender stereotypes. My own ethnographic research shows that in schools that serve predominantly poor young black men, the relationships boys have with one another, and with adult male staff members are key. A school I call Perry High—one of the schools in an East Coast city where I conducted my research—serves a predominantly poor and black student population, grades 7 through 12. Led by an administration made up of nearly all black men, the staff has made it a priority to cultivate more positive notions of manhood among the students.

Perry administrators believe that a school where black men care for black boys can be empowering. At Perry High, some of

adults for attention, and you become that surrogate father that so many of them are looking for." Male staff members used this as an opportunity to share visions of responsible adulthood. Gerald, an eighth grader, observed that what it meant to be a man was "to have a job and to be able to do important stuff like taking care of a family."

To instill a sense of responsible adulthood, a new mentoring program matched male adult professionals in the community with ninth graders. The organizers targeted this group because of the high dropout rates among black boys after ninth grade. At a meeting of mentors and mentees, Raymond spoke eloquently about how the program had impacted him and his peers. Usually when male visitors came to the school, they aggressively relayed the message that the boys should avoid heading down a "dead-end street," he said. But Raymond appreciated that the mentors were not trying to scare the boys. Instead, they helped the boys to create positive visions of themselves: going to college or vocational school, contributing to the community instead of being a threat to it. Speaking directly to the male mentors in the room, he asked for their continued guidance

and patience. "We're still learning how to be men and we need your help," he said. "Give us some time to bloom."

The mix of boys, encompassing six grades, meant that younger and older boys had opportunities to interact that they may not have had outside of school. The older boys felt the need to respond to seventh

and eighth graders who were aching for male guidance. The younger boys tried to "play off," or imitate, older boys. Just as they did with male teachers, groups of young boys followed boys much older than them around the school. The older students took the younger students under their wing, looking after them as though they were their own siblings.

At this unique all-boys public school, rather than forge relationships of fear, older boys and men took responsibility for and invested in the lives of the younger boys. In this environment, young black boys are able to envision themselves, in turn, as responsible men who will one day hold steady jobs and care for boys who need them. Should more of these single-sex schools open, we're likely to find that it's for reasons that go beyond that of gender equity, reasons such as the opportunity to foster caring, mentoring relationships.

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the boys assumed that being "put with other boys," as seventh grader Lenny told me, meant they were in trouble. Mass incarceration of African Americans led these boys to fear all-male institutions—prisons, along with the city's disciplinary schools, where boys who commit major offenses are sent. Administrators and teachers focused on earning the trust of their students, and on strengthening relationships among men and boys.

A common stereotype of young black men is that they resist authority. But at Perry High, many boys were open to having close relationships with men, especially if the men first opened up to them. The boys believed they needed those relationships in order to thrive in school. Referring to the adults in the building, Dante, a 12th grader, told me: "We need you. You don't need us." The youngest boys, from 12 to 14 years old, particularly doted on male teachers, shadowing them throughout the building and sticking around after school just to hang out. Groups of young boys were eager to connect with teachers who were willing to teach them a new hobby like playing the guitar, or spoken word poetry.

Mr. Westbrook, an administrator, remarked, "I see a lot of kids, especially the younger kids, who really cling onto certain