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William Ayers, Therese Quinn, David Stovall

Social Justice Education for Black Male Students in Urban Schools

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Making Space for Diverse Masculinities

Lance T. McCready

Introduction

Urban education is the field of study that focuses on teaching and learning in K–12 urban schools. The research literature on urban education has tended to focus on the problems of low-status minority groups, the complexity of urban school systems, and the financing and governance of such systems (Gordon, 2003). Progressive teacher-educator Joe Kincheloe argues that

Urban education teachers and educators need a rigorous, inter/multidisciplinary understanding of urban education. They need to draw on a number of disciplines and transdisciplines such as history, cognitive studies, philosophy, political science, economics geography, and others to help them understand the complex context in which urban education takes place. In this way teachers and educators gain unique and powerful insights into research on educational policy, pedagogy, and the lives of children living in densely populated urban settings.

While Kincheloe (2004) and others assert that urban educators need a “rigorous, inter/multidisciplinary understanding of urban education,” gender and sexuality studies are rarely if ever included in lists of “disciplines and transdisciplines” (p. 14) urban educators need to draw on.

Typically, subject areas that emphasize race, class, and political economy dominate urban education, as a field of study (Anderson, 1992; Anyon, 1997; Kunjufu, 1982/1986; Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989; Noguera, 1996; Rothstein, 2004; Wilson, 1987). I speculate there are a host of reasons why gender and sexuality issues are left out of the discourse of urban education. There might be a fear of tainting discussions of race and class with sexuality since historically homosexuality and women’s issues have served as “wedge” issues in communities of color (Pharr, 1996). Moreover, recognizing the way gender and sexuality inform issues and problems in urban education inevitably leads to more, not less, complexity.

From a policymaking perspective, too much complexity seemingly weakens the possibility that educational policies can provide solutions to the problems of urban education. Both of these concerns are understandable, however, using them to guide the practice of social justice in urban education is highly problematic because they lead educators to overlook the ways in which gender intersects with other identities and how these intersections contribute to unique experiences of oppression and privilege. In this chapter, I focus on one of the most pressing social justice issues facing urban educators in the United States: race–gender gaps (or disparities by race and gender) in achievement, discipline, and participation (Lopez, 2003). Using a case study of Black male students’ experience
of marginalization in an urban high school in Northern California, I argue that urban educators undertheorize masculinity in their conceptualization of race–gender gaps. I begin this discussion with the conceptual framework that has most influenced my thinking about social justice in urban education: intersectionality.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is a feminist theory that starts from the premise that people live multiple, layered identities derived from social relations, history, and the operation of structures of power (Association for Women’s Rights in Development [AWID], 2004). Intersectional analysis uncovers multiple identities and therefore reveals different types of discrimination and disadvantage that occur as a consequence of the combination of identities. For example, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins uses a feminist intersectional analysis to understand the experiences of working class African-American women, in particular, how multiple forms of oppression have been used to disempower Black women and deny them citizenship (Collins, 1990). From Collins’s perspective, “Assuming that each system (of oppression) needs the others in order to function creates a distinct theoretical stance that stimulates the rethinking of basic social science concepts” (p. 222).

The importance of rethinking basic social science concepts such as race–gender gaps from feminist intersectional perspectives became evident to me while I was working on a school–university collaborative action research project (CARP) at a California High School (CHS) located in a small urban community in the Bay Area of California. Teachers, parents, graduate students, and professors had come together under the auspices of CARP to address race and class disparities in achievement and racial segregation within school programs and activities. Working together with approximately 10 other members of the Core Team, CARP’s steering committee, our task was to strategize how to explain the goals of CARP and recruit teachers at the next staff development meeting.

“How should we explain the goals of the Project?” asked Joyce, a Japanese-American woman in her late 30s who taught Ethnic Studies. “Why don’t we just say that the D-F rate for Black and Latino students is higher than any other racial or ethnic group of students?” offered Don, a White, male math teacher in his mid-50s. “But, that’s not entirely true,” I countered, “because Black and Latino males are failing at a higher rate than their female counterparts. Shouldn’t we bring up the gender dimension as well?” Several teachers and graduate students nodded their heads in agreement after I made this statement. After a brief pause during which time it seemed as if everyone was thinking about how to explain the goals of CARP in a way that incorporated gender issues, a faculty member suggested, “Let’s just stick to our original agenda of race and class disparities in achievement and hold off on the gender issue; we don’t want to make things too complicated too soon.” Everyone nodded in agreement, seemingly relieved that we found a way to sidestep the “complicated” gender dimension of the achievement gap at CHS.

I wanted to challenge this faculty member, but felt, in the absence of vocal support from my colleagues, that my concerns would be interpreted as personal rather than integral to the political agenda of the project. While the Core Team seemed to appreciate knowing I was gay, and that I had strong interest in women and gender studies, I never received any encouragement to share insights from either a feminist or queer perspective. My sexuality made the Core Team more diverse, but it was not expected this added diversity would have an impact on the political agenda of CARP. In addition, the faculty member who encouraged us to “hold off” on gender issues was charismatic and well-respected. So, even though I was outraged at the ease with which we sidestepped gender
issues, at that moment I felt pushing a feminist intersectional perspective could weaken my ties on CARP and within the school. I decided to investigate the way gender and sexuality oppression affects disparities in achievement and participation on my own.

Key Questions and Issues
During the four years I worked on CARP, between 1996 and 2000, I was drawn to questions of why students from the poorest sections of the city consistently had the lowest grade point averages, or why Black male students represented the majority of students in the school’s discipline system, or why in a school where over 60% of the students were non-White, the social/support group for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students tended to be White female students. Two other graduate student members of CARP and I conducted in-depth interviews with 10 Black male students as part of CARP’s Taking Stock and Class of 2000 collaborative inquiry teams.

The data we collected revealed that Black male students were marginalized within the school’s institutional structure, meaning they felt isolated from mainstream programs, were concentrated in low-track classes, and underrepresented in most extracurricular activities. The specific experiences of three gay and gender nonconforming Black male students that I present in this chapter, however, indicate a need for urban educators to understand the way multiple forms of oppression contribute to the marginalization of Black male students. Intersectionality can help urban educators make sense of the identities and circumstances of Black male students, and help us understand the ways in which Black male students develop a sense of their gender and sexual identities in relation to their race, class, and ability identities, and the complex ways their identities affect school participation. Out of this complexity emerge new ways of envisioning social justice education for Black male students that expand the boundaries of gender expression (for both male and female students) and open up the potentialities of gender identity and sexuality for everyone.

Gay and Gender Nonconforming Black Male Students at CHS

David
During the fall semester 1997 I interviewed David, a Black gay male senior at CHS. David was 17 years old when I interviewed him. He was a lanky 6’4” with skin the color of honey. He had large, earthy brown eyes, meticulously arched eyebrows, and usually dressed in jeans, sneakers, a T-shirt, and a hooded sweatshirt. Occasionally, I saw him wear something flashier such as a Hawaiian print shirt, but most times he wore standard Gap-inspired clothes with either a baseball or wool-knit cap, depending on how cold it was outside. The combination of David’s light brown skin color, height, and what some students viewed as feminine appearing eyes, marked him as gender nonconforming and thus made him a target of abuse from his peers.

I was rapt with attention as David recounted multiple incidents of harassment he received in elementary and middle school. “I had long curly hair,” he said, “so people used to think I was a girl and I used to get teased a lot because of that.” When David got to CHS the harassment became more physical. “...People eventually started throwing things at me and shit.” David approached Mr. Jones, a Black man in his mid-40s and the director of CHS security, about the harassment he was receiving, particularly from his Black male peers. Mr. Jones asked, “Well, what did you do to deserve it [the harassment]?” David replied, “I was walking out of the library and these [Black] boys threw
Mr. Jones replied, “Oh, well, usually someone does something to someone first before they’re going to throw some books at you.”

Besides the fact that Mr. Jones was clearly “blaming the victim,” his response reflects the way certain forms of violence and harassment that maintain the masculine status quo are seemingly sanctioned by members of the school community. When Mr. Jones asks “What did you do to deserve it?” And later says, “usually someone does something to someone first before they’re going to throw some books at you,” he is letting David know that he must have provoked the harassment by doing something inappropriate. Mr. Jones doesn’t name David’s gender expression explicitly, he implies it through coded language (“something”) and his skepticism of David’s innocence.

As a result of this harassment during the fall semester of his junior year, David no longer felt safe at CHS and decided, after much pleading with his mother, to finish high school in Independent Studies, a self-directed high school diploma program administered by the continuation high school in the school district. It is important to understand that David’s decision to leave was not based solely on the harassment he experienced because of his gender nonconformity. Rather, his gender nonconformity exacerbated the marginalization he experienced because of his gender identity. For example, in my interview with David I learned he had been identified as a “gifted” student in elementary school. For most of his time in school David was in a separate academic track from the majority of Black students. According to David, participating in gifted and talented programs was hard because he was one of the few students of color in his classes and his Black peers felt his participation in these programs symbolized that he was trying to “act White” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). In addition, David was biracial; his mother was White, his father Black. At times, David believed his skin color combined with his gender nonconformity, seemed to position him outside the “boundaries of blackness” in the eyes of his Black peers. Finally, David was becoming more aware of his gay identity and did not think there was an adult at CHS with whom he could discuss his feelings.

Although David experienced enormous personal growth during his year on Independent Studies (he developed close friendships with other gay, lesbian, and gender nonconforming students of color) his academic progress was less than stellar. After giving it much thought he decided to confront his fear of failure and give CHS a second chance. When he returned to CHS, however, David found it difficult to find a peer group that met his social and emotional needs. Even though he openly identified as gay, he felt alienated from the group of White female students who participated in Project 10. According to David, “It’s (Project 10) about four or five girls who all know each other. They’re all out, you know, within that group. And they go there I guess for social support.” David felt that it was more difficult for guys, guys of color in particular, to “come out” and feel comfortable attending a queer support group. He attributed the difficulty of students of color openly identifying as gay or lesbian to cultural differences in the ways homophobia and heterosexism are expressed in Black communities.

In addition to possible cultural differences in identifying as gay, David’s experiences seem to reflect the tendency of White female students, like their Black peers, to socialize with one another around a distinct set of racially defined concerns, rather than build coalitions with students from different racial backgrounds who may have an entirely different set of interests. For example, in Women Without Class (Bettie, 2003), Julie Bettie describes how White, middle-class female students, “preps,” developed intricate social networks that allowed them to control participation in the student government, a class where students learned “leadership skills” that translated into the management of other students they considered subordinate.
Fran Thompson, the faculty advisor for CHS Project 10, believed that the strong participation of White female students was related to the fact that they were the most concerned about encountering discrimination for being openly queer. In contrast, queer students of color seemed to relate more to groups outside of CHS such as Lavender, which was a more racially diverse support group run by a local lesbian and gay community center. Admitting that “diversifying the ethnic composition of the group is very complicated,” Fran questioned her own ability to fully understand the multitude of pressures queer students of color face. Her limited understanding of multiple dimensions of social/support needed by queer youth of color may have unintentionally alienated David, encouraging him and others to seek resources outside the school. In this way Project 10 and other queer youth programs in segregated school environments may privilege White students and marginalize queer youth of color.

From a feminist intersectional perspective, David’s gender nonconformity and academic status seemed to be the primary causes of harassment from his Black peers. His marginalization from Project 10, however, seemed to stem from his racial identity. More specifically, the White female participants in Project 10 were unaware of how to construct the group’s activities around the identities of LGBT students of color like David. Through examining David’s multiple identities and the various forms of discrimination he faced, urban educators can begin the difficult work of developing more comprehensive approaches to social justice education. As we turn to the next student narrative, we see how Black male students’ class identity can affect their experience of marginalization.

Jamal

At the time of the interview, Jamal was a trim 5’10”, dark brown skinned African-American young man with a mustache and goatee. His sparkling light brown eyes complemented his short afro which he often wore in twists, at the time a common urban style for African-American youth. He also liked to experiment with his dress, one day wearing a hip hop outfit, the next day wearing platform black shoes, tight black pants, and a tight fitting, dark blue shirt with long lapels.

Growing up in my house, it was totally different. Just because of like who my family is and stuff. So, it’s like I don’t know I think I compare it to like being I guess um, maybe being interracial? Having a Black parent and a White parent. It’s like cause you’re living like this kinda double existence. So, it’s like I lived in the ghetto, but my life was different than my neighbors. Like I had summer vacations and I had everything I wanted and if anything the other kids thought I was…. Cause I was also an only child, so anything I wanted I got….I’d say, I’d say, I mean, if it’s, if middle-class is based off of education I’d say, I mean my mom has two master’s degrees. Everybody [in my family] has an education. I think I’ve lived a middle-class life, just in the ‘hood.

Jamal’s likening of his middle-class status to Whiteness demonstrates the complex ways he identifies as Black and how his sense of authenticity as a young Black man is intimately tied to his socioeconomic status. By comparing his living situation to that of an interracial person, Jamal shows how he is struggling to reconcile his sense that in some situations, acting middle-class would be perceived as being less Black, or White, by his economically poor Southside neighbors.

In addition to socioeconomic status, Jamal’s identity as Black was influenced by his gender. More specifically, Jamal felt his masculinity was different from the majority of his
Black male peers, which inadvertently called into question his Blackness. Both in school and in his neighborhood, Jamal remembered having different interests from most boys his age:

This guy [Durrell], like we were friends from fourth grade until age 13. But I mean like, like there was a difference. I was doing things differently. Like he was popping wheelies on his bicycle and I wasn’t interested in popping wheelies. Or he would learn to play, he would learn to, um ride his skateboard and I stuck with the skates, and skates were considered, they weren’t considered as like macho.... And like, I don’t know, but that, I guess...I guess I started to feel different toward like fourth, fifth grade. But I don’t know, ‘cause I was fat in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. So I don’t know if it was because I was fat or because I, I like...Like I hated sports and PE... and I didn’t dress like the other kids. Like I would come in tight like um...Not exactly leggings, but I mean, you know, like tight, like I wasn’t into other fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth grade boys styles. And like I would bring my Diana Ross tourbooks to school and they were probably into what? Um, what was popular then? That was when rap was starting to emerge. They were probably, yeah they were, I remember this. They were like idolizing LL Cool J and I was like idolizing Diana and Janet you know? Even just, that was just an example as far as music goes of the difference between me and them.

As Jamal’s interests grew apart from most of his Black male peers, their inclinations toward certain performances of gender also diverged. Jamal’s Black male peers idolized LL Cool J, a popular rapper from New York City whose Kangol hats, muscular body, womanizing, and aggressive style of rapping won him the stamp of approval from throngs of Black male youth who perceived him as authentically Black, male, urban, and heterosexual. Jamal, on the other hand, idolized Diana Ross who epitomized Black people who were “living well.” By idolizing Diana Ross, a wealthy Black woman who clearly had made it out of the ghetto, the authenticity of Jamal’s Blackness was again called into question. In seventh grade, however, Jamal figured out that certain masculine identity markers could garner him power, prestige, and respect:

I remember in the seventh grade it was like this big thing when somebody.... We were playing kickball and I like, I was in the outfield or whatever and like I caught the ball and everybody was like “Jamal caught a ball!” because I was not known for my athletic ability. No, it was like a big thing. Like it was around the school, like “Jamal caught a ball!” It was a big, I’m telling you it was a big thing that I caught a ball. Everybody was surprised, nobody ever expected me to catch a ball ever in my life.

Jamal’s experience of catching the ball seemed like a critical turning point in early adolescence when he realized that participating and excelling in certain extracurricular activities, particularly athletic ones, could win the approval of his Black peers.

This strategy would come in handy at CHS where being middle-class and high-achieving set him apart from the majority of Black students who, if not poor and underachieving, would at least posture as such. White students occupied the college-bound academic tracks, while Black students were overrepresented in low-level classes. I asked Jamal how he managed to make his way around or through the formidable social boundaries between Black students and non-Black students, especially since he had been in the college-bound track and was somewhat of a gender nonconformist. Jamal responded with the familiar strategy of participating in the extracurricular activities that were valued by
his peers. For example, at CHS he was class secretary for student government. This position gave him influence since student government organized proms and other important social events.

In addition to being involved in student government, Jamal maintained his racial authenticity and influence by deemphasizing his gayness. More specifically, he stayed away from Project 10 because he knew participating in this activity would damage his reputation among Black students. In short, to align oneself with Project 10 meant to invite harassment. According to Jamal, these dynamics were particularly evident when students read announcements in class for Project 10 from the Bulletin, the daily publication for school-wide events:

I: What do you remember about Project 10?
J: Just that they used to have announcements in the Bulletin, “Are you gay, bisexual, queer, questioning?” And then like I guess there would always be a designated reader for the class Bulletin everyday. So then I mean sometimes, it was interesting though, it was interesting because when I would have a predominantly White class in the morning second period when the Bulletin was read, like they would read it, they would read it. And people were just kinda like, just listen to it. There might be little side comments here and there, but they would listen and like, “That’s a club in the school.” But in the Black classes that I had, that same period? Ohhh my god, they would skip over it like the club did not exist. They would either speak through it [the announcement], or it was just treated differently than the other club announcements, which is interesting. People always, there was a running joke at school like people wanted to go and actually see who actually went to the club. Like they wanted to go and stand outside the door just to see who went.

Why didn’t Jamal express anger or indignation that his peers dismissed the importance of Project 10 and actually made it difficult for him and other LGBT students to attend? His nonchalant tone suggests he could not even conceive how the group could benefit a student like himself who identified as Black, gay, and middle class. In addition, avoiding Project 10 may have served as a way for Jamal to show solidarity with his peers who thought it served no purpose for Black students. His concern about his Black peers’ reaction can be traced to his experience of being identifiably middle class in a Black community where the majority of residents were poor and working class. The fact that Jamal’s class status differed from the majority of his peers made him incredibly aware of how his racial authenticity was being judged. His peers served as human “panopticons” for Project 10—living, breathing technologies of surveillance that govern students’ every move and gesture (Foucault, 1984). Under the gaze of his panoptic Black peers, Jamal feared the social consequences of being seen at a Project 10 meeting. Jamal assessed the risk of openly identifying with a predominantly White group of LGBT students and made a cool, pragmatic decision not to attend because of the way it might sever his already tenuous ties to homophobic Black peers.

Jamal’s marginalization both converges with and diverges from David’s in interesting ways. Both young men seemed to experience marginalization as a result of their gender identity; however, Jamal’s class identity positioned him differently with respect to Project 10. Jamal, unlike David, never even attended a Project 10 meeting because the class differences he experienced in the Black community influenced the way he negotiated his gender and sexual identities. For Jamal, attending a Project 10 meeting could potentially call into question his already fragile relationships with his Black peers, most of whom were homophobic and did not identify as middle class.
From a feminist intersectional perspective, Jamal’s narrative complicates the notion of marginalization by showing how class identity can affect Black male students’ experience of marginalization. Jamal chose to avoid Project 10 altogether to maintain his ties with the Black community. Interestingly, both young men were harassed and marginalized by members of their own racial group, which raises a question of intragroup marginalization (Cohen, 1999). It seems that social justice education for Black male students would have to address the way various forms of oppression lead to the marginalization of Black male students both between and within racial groups. As we turn to Antoine’s narrative, the theme of intragroup marginalization returns, as well as a heretofore unmentioned social identity that holds the potential to marginalize Black male students in urban schools: ability.

Antoine

At 18 years old, 5’7” and 150 pounds, Antoine was smaller than most of his Black male peers. His medium brown skin, prominent nose, light brown eyes (from contact lenses), textured dark brown hair (with a bronze tuft in the front), and a slightly nasal, lispy, baritone voice gave him a feminine air. Despite these qualities he dressed in the uniform worn by most of his Black male peers: baggy jeans, T-shirt under an oxford-type shirt, plain baseball cap, pierced left ear, boots, and a backpack with a single arm sling. His clothing reflected his desire to fit in rather than to call attention to the ways his voice, stature, hairstyle, openly gay sexual identity, and participation in dance set him apart as gender nonconforming.

When Antoine came to CHS in the ninth grade he lacked confidence. “I wasn’t really good at like holding your head up and smiling and stuff like that,” he said. When he met with a counselor about his class schedule the counselor brought up the physical education. Antoine asserted that “I’m not interested in any kind of sports or nothing like that so don’t put me in that.” The counselor suggested Afro-Haitian dance, which at CHS fulfills the P.E. requirement. Antoine agreed to “give it a shot.” During his first semester of the Afro-Haitian Dance Program (ADP) he was nervous and danced in the back. Second semester he began to warm up, and by sophomore year he remembered, “I was fine…and I gradually started coming to the front [of the class].”

Although participating in ADP gave Antoine a newfound celebrity, he continued to be socially reserved due in part to openly identifying as gay and, as I later learned, being a special education student. The disproportionate representation of Black students in special education programs has been well documented, Black students are disproportionately referred to and placed in the high-incidence special education categories of mental retardation, emotional or behavioral disorders, and learning disabilities, and once labeled are educated in segregated, self-contained settings with little or absolutely no exposure or access to their nondisabled peers or to the general curriculum (Blanchett, 2006). Given overrepresentation of Black students in special education, it makes sense that the stigma of being a special education student made Antoine extremely self-conscious of his status relative to his peers, all of whom were Black, but not special education students. He had difficulty accepting his academic shortcomings and routinely skipped his special education classes to serve as an informal teaching assistant in beginning ADP classes. Even though Mama Mwingu, the director of ADP, knew he was skipping academic classes, she empathized with his desire to fit in with Black students who were labeled disabled.

In addition to marginalization caused by his status as a special education student, Antoine, like David and Jamal, experienced harassment for being gender nonconforming. Some of the heterosexual-identified Black male dancers liked to tease him by punching
him on the arm, slapping him upside the head, or expressing their disgust with homosexuality. When I asked Antoine about this negative behavior he suggested it could be a form of flirting or same-sex desire:

I think everybody has thought about it in a negative or positive way, being with the same sex. And when I say a negative way, if I was straight and I was like, “Ooh, I can’t see myself doing it to another dude” or “I can’t see myself being with a dude.” That’s still thinking about it!

From my perspective, Antoine’s nonconfrontational reaction to the harassment was a way of keeping the peace with Black male students with whom he wanted to remain friends. For instance, I often observed Chris, another Black male dancer in ADP, jokingly hit Antoine upside the head during rehearsal. On another occasion I observed Darrell, a CHS graduate who had been hired as one of the official drummers for ADP, hit Antoine repeatedly as Antoine yelled, “Stop!” at the top of his lungs. Antoine chuckled after both incidents.

When I witnessed these incidents I was baffled as to why Antoine did not seem excessively bothered by his peers’ aggressiveness. After reflecting on my observations and interviews, one possible explanation I deduced was that Antoine liked the attention his heterosexual peers showed him, regardless of whether or not it was violent, because it made him feel like one of the guys. It allowed him to interact with his peers and counteracted the marginalization that could result from openly identifying as gay or being a special education student. I wonder, however, what kind of social environment such coping styles create in urban schools. As a matter of social justice, shouldn’t urban educators attempt to facilitate school climates that affirm a range of masculine identities and work against both intergroup and intragroup marginalization? In the final section of this chapter I consider three necessary conceptual tools for enabling urban educators to create such environments.

Conceptual Tools for Social Justice Education in Urban Schools: Intersectionality, Multiple Masculinities, Antihomophobia Education

The narratives of gay and gender nonconforming Black male students presented in this chapter have important implications for social justice education in urban schools, particularly with respect to the way urban educators understand the marginalization of Black male students evidenced by race–gender gaps in achievement, participation, and discipline. Rather than making specific policy-driven recommendations, I present the implications as conceptual tools that hold the possibility for several different kinds of practices and interventions.

Conceptual Tool 1: Intersectionality

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, feminist intersectional perspectives grew out of the particular situation of women of color who experienced marginalization based on multiple social identities including their race, class, gender, and sexuality identities. Women’s social justice organizations such as the Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW) use intersectional feminist frameworks (IFF) to bring together the visions, directions, and goals of women from diverse experiences and different perspectives (see http://www.criaw-icref.ca/indexFrame_e.htm). IFF fosters an under-
standing of the many circumstances that combine with discriminatory social practices to produce and sustain inequality and exclusion.

Overall, as a theoretical framework, feminist intersectional perspectives or “intersectionality” emphasize both general patterns of exclusion and particular experiences of marginalization. Focusing on the particular experiences of gay and gender nonconforming Black male students enable urban educators to uncover multiple identities and reveal different types of marginalization that occur among Black male students in general. While the narratives of gay and gender nonconforming Black male students presented in this chapter reveal how Black male students’ marginalization can be traced to their race, class, gender, sexuality, or ability identities, a thread that runs throughout all of the narratives is experiencing harassment due to gender nonconformity. The experience of harassment, I argue, reflects a general intolerance for nonnormative gender identities which points to the need for urban educators to incorporate conceptual tools that allow them to develop policies and practices that affirm a range of gender identities for Black male students. Two such conceptual tools are multiple masculinities and antihomophobia.

**Conceptual Tool 2: Multiple Masculinities**

Sociologist R. W. Connell uses the term *multiple masculinities* to describe the variety of masculine gender identities that exists (Connell, 1993). Imms (2000) describes four key characteristics of the multiple masculinities approach:

1. Masculinity is a multiple entity.
2. Gender is constructed by individuals as well as societal forces. Individuals do not automatically adopt predetermined gender roles; they are continually, active in building, negotiating, and maintaining perceptions of their gender.
3. Gender is a relational construct. Thus, boys do not construct their versions of masculinity apart from the influences of femininity or other men.
4. Multiple masculinities diversify hegemonic power structures, rendering them more accessible to rehabilitation.

The multiple masculinities approach is an important conceptual tool for urban educators because it provides a framework for understanding how Black male students’ gender identities are constantly being built, negotiated, and maintained. Moreover, the multiple masculinities approach calls attention to the existence of nonhegemonic masculinities (masculinities that are subordinated, or repressed) like those of gay and gender nonconforming Black male students. Multiple masculinities approaches are beginning to be used to develop “boy-centered programs” in Germany, England, and Australia (Connell, 1996).

As a matter of social justice, it is crucial that urban educators affirm nonhegemonic masculinities of Black male students not only because these masculinities are known to invite harassment, but also because they hold the potential for conceptualizing Black male student identity in ways that resist institutional- and peer-driven forces of marginalization. Consider, for example, the way Antoine used dance, thought by many to be a feminine activity, to counteract the marginalization he experienced in special education. From my perspective, what seems to prevent urban educators from seeing the possibilities of nonhegemonic masculinities is homophobia, the fear of homosexuals based on societal norms of masculinity/femininity and a belief in biologically-based innate sex differences. For this reason, I believe antihomophobia education is a controversial, yet
crucial conceptual tool for urban educators who want to address the marginalization of Black male students.

**Conceptual Tool 3: Antihomophobia Education**

Antihomophobia education is a controversial field of social justice work that challenges both the fear and the ideas underlying the fear of homosexuality. Antihomophobia education is both dynamic and volatile because it invites students and educators to confront and negotiate a range of complex and contradictory subject positions associated with politics and gender identity and sexuality (Robinson, Ferfolja, & Goldstein, 2004). Although metropolitan areas are home to some of the most politically vibrant and visible LGBT communities, urban educators, as a group, are ambivalent about the relevance of antihomophobia to their social justice work in urban schools, perhaps because historically race, class, political economy, and immigration issues have dominated the landscape of urban education. Or maybe urban educators’ own homophobia has prevented them from taking gender and sexuality issues seriously. While these issues are without a doubt critical, at the end of the day gender and sexuality oppressions remain overlooked as significant structural and cultural forces in urban communities, which in turn leads to their undertheorization in urban education (McCready, 2001).

Antihomophobia education in the United States has been taken up somewhat erratically by professional organizations such as the Queer Studies special interest group in the American Educational Research Association, LGBT youth organizations such as the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York City and Horizons Youth Program in Chicago, and LGBT education-advocacy organizations such as Project 10 and Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN). GLSEN has been particularly successful at galvanizing antihomophobia work at the local level through providing technical assistance to teachers and students who want to start gay–straight alliances (GSAs) in their schools. It is unclear, however, to what extent GSAs are present in urban schools, and whether or not these organizations serve the needs of students of color (remember David’s experience in Project 10) (McCready, 2004).

Antihomophobia education is crucial for urban educators helping Black male students “make space” for diverse masculinities that resist marginalization. The writings of Black gay men can serve as a template for this work of reimagining Black manhood. For example, in the book *Brother to Brother: New Writings by Black Gay Men* (Hemphill, 1991) a variety of writers such as Isaac Julien, Essex Hemphill, Marlon Riggs, and Kobena Mercer confront their fear of being openly gay, gender nonconforming, profeminist, and authentically Black. Similarly, from my perspective, much of the refusal to explore new definitions of Black masculinity stem from the fear that profeminist, antiheterosexist conceptions of Black manhood threaten the stability of the Black community. It is clear, however, from the lives of the Black gay male students depicted in this chapter that gender oppression (Connell, 2000) and compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) create more, rather than less trouble for Black male students in urban schools. Given these problems, urban educators should consider using intersectionality, multiple masculinities, and antihomophobia education to address issues of social justice for Black male students in urban schools.

Notes

1. CARP was a six-year project comprised of collaborative inquiry teams of teachers, students, administrators, parents, professors, and graduate students who investigated the reasons
behind two problems CHS has faced since it voluntarily desegregated over 50 years ago: the race–class academic achievement gap and racial segregation in academic and extracurricular programs.

2. In accordance with the recommendations from the UCB Protection of Human Subjects Committee, the names of all people associated with CHS and DP, including teachers, students, faculty, graduate students, and staff have been changed to protect their identities.

3. Until recently, the CHS administration published an annual report of the number of Ds and Fs given to students, disaggregated by race and ethnicity. Black and Latino students always received the higher numbers of Ds and Fs compared to White and Asian-American students. Teachers and administrators often used the D-F rate report to highlight racial disparities in achievement at CHS.

References


