



the backgrounds of contemporary discourse. Crenshaw's (1991) introduction of intersectionality, with specific reference to the experiences of Black women and the law, not only speaks to these lived experiences, but attends to dynamics of power, privilege and space in our account of intersecting identities in society. She asserts that, "intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245).

While we often think about how identity and systems of oppression operate it is often situated in conversations around race, gender, and sexuality. While that may be the prevalent lens utilized to examine these intersections, one's academic abilities, aptitude, and socioeconomic and political access, inform how we examine the lived experiences of gifted students of color. While one's academic abilities should serve as a springboard to success, students of color who are gifted often experience hurdles towards their success. Ford (2014) notes "it is unprofessional and unethical to trivialize, tolerate, accept, or permit the inequitable distribution of resources and opportunity to marginalized students, many of whom are African American and Hispanic" (p. 143). As a result of this marginalization, there are continued needs to ensure that we examine the opportunities provided to and for Black gifted students as they make their ways through life and come to terms with the multiple, coexisting, rather than competing, identities in conjunction with their gifted identity.

As a Black, effeminate boy who was labeled gifted in Pre-Kindergarten, I juggled my multiple identities constantly. Going home to my Jamaican family, a culture pegged for its homophobic policies and laws, meant trying to subdue any trace of my sexuality; being in school meant constantly having to be smart to ensure my seat at the table, while being Black (and in many cases, West Indian) was important for me as I worked to continue to stay connected to my peers in my neighborhood. These negotiations would not only be part of my life as a K-12 student. As I transitioned into being in front of the classroom, there were other balancing acts that served as protective barriers when dealing with students, teachers, and parents.

Given the relevance of my experiences to the topic of this article, I employ a critical autoethnographic analysis to explore my transition from student to teacher. In particular, I focus on how coping mechanisms that I enacted as a Black, Gay and Gifted Male translated into my experiences as a classroom teacher. I share these stories to add voice to the limited narratives on Black gay male success stories in K-12 education, and to speak to how Black male teachers who fit into this mold have to begin to think about navigating these personal issues while being a model for their students who fall into the various identities that they related to and feel kinship with, and to shift conversations about queer teachers from a lens of whiteness. Inspired by the work of Ramon Goings (2015), this work continues to add to the growing literature around Black male educator voices speaking on their experiences as students and as teachers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I employ Whiting's Scholar Identity Model. Whiting defines scholar identity "as one in which culturally diverse males view themselves as academicians, as studious, as competent and capable, and as intelligent or talented in school settings" (Whiting, 2006, p. 224). For Whiting, with "sustained focus on developing a scholarly identity, hopefully, more African American males will find a sense of belonging in school settings, and value education and all that learning has to offer" (p. 227). His model focuses on 9 main tenets: masculinity, racial identity, academic self-confidence, self-awareness, need for achievement over a need for affiliation, internal locus

of control, willing to make sacrifices, future orientation, and self-efficacy. Whiting then relies on the work of several other scholars to parse together his scholar identity model. Importantly, Whiting notes that this model is not solely about the student; Black males who thrive need role models and mentors, an academic school cultural, enrolled in a school setting that pays attention to multiculturalism, culturally relevant and responsive counseling services and the ability to engage in community service/outreach. This holistic approach, for Whiting, will lead to the development and support of a Black gifted male populace that strives to succeed.

For this specific work, I intend to focus on three specific tenets of his model: masculinity, need for achievement over a need for affiliation, and internal locus of control. When thinking of my own development as a student and teacher, these three tenets recurred in my reflections around key moments. Masculinity, for Whiting, is the notion that Black males with a scholar identity do not conflate the idea of being intelligent with being feminine or “unmanly.” Rather, scholars are able to see themselves as both being smart and male without falling victim to visions of toxic masculinity around them in the media and their communities. McClelland’s (1961) notion that people have a need to achieve and succeed serves as the basis of Whiting’s argument about the need for achievement over affiliation. Whiting argues that Black males who fit the criteria for this marker of success do not need to be popular; rather, he notes that there is delayed gratification and higher impact by placing value on achievement rather than acquaintance. Finally, for internal locus of control, Whiting notes that Black males who engender this characteristic are not only optimistic but their strong work ethic and willingness to ask for help in times of struggle aids their ability to persist.

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Black Gifted Male Student Educational Experiences**

Currently, there has been much scholarly conversation about how Black males are depicted from a deficit perspective (Goings, 2016; Harper, 2009; Strayhorn, Blakewood & DeVita, 2008). Inclusive in this conversation is the overrepresentation and overdiagnosis of Black males in special education (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2015), lessened engagement of Black males in their academics (Ferguson, 2001), the notion that Black males devalue schooling (Ogbu, 2004), and most important to this study, the underrepresentation of Black males in gifted and talented programs (Ford & Grantham, 2003). For many Black males, these experiences lead to increasing numbers of disciplinary actions and plants the seeds for the ever pervasive growth of the school to prison pipeline (Harmon & Ford, 2010).

Research around the experiences of Black males in gifted education speak to different, and sometimes more complex, narratives as it sits atop the imagery associated with Black males as a whole. Research shows that Black males are often underrepresented and under-labeled as gifted and talented (Ford, 2013). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection, in 2013-2014, Black males accounted for only 4.4% of all gifted students<sup>1</sup> in the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2004). This

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<sup>1</sup> Title IX of the Elementary and Secondary Student Act (ESSA) defines gifted education as “students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities”

blockage of the funnel for Black gifted males results in Black males not receiving access to accelerated academics, Advanced Placement classes, and other opportunities that could positively impact their educational trajectory. Simultaneously, these opportunity gaps often contribute to the academic achievement gaps that are often associated with the Black male experience in school and can lead to the underachievement of Black gifted males (Ford & Moore, 2013). For a wide range of issues (family, school, emotional, etc.), Black males in gifted and talented programs can fall victim to some of the same issues with disengagement and not see these experiences as beneficial to their educational and life trajectories.

For those making it beyond the opening of the funnel into gifted and talented educational programs, there is a continued need to fight against prevailing stereotypes both within a school and outside of school to support their existence. Black gifted boys often have to deal with the notion that being gifted is not seen as being masculine. Black males were more likely to be impacted by negative peer pressures based on their engagement in academics (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Once enrolled in gifted and talented programs, Black males must fight several prevailing notions to ensure their persistence. Black males often adopt the “cool pose” as part and parcel to their survival in America. Cool pose serves as a coping mechanism that “provides a mask that suggest competence, high self-esteem, control, and inner strength” (Majors & Billson, 1993, p. 5). To maintain this pose, Black gifted males often choose to avoid institutions like the library and others associated with academic excellence or to not have their street credibility and sensibility questioned (Whiting, 2006). These boys must walk a delicate line so that they can still reap the benefits of gifted education while not calling into question their place as Black males in their communities.

The ability to maintain a connection to their Blackness becomes a critical aspect of self-existence for Black gifted males. This becomes hard as they fight against notions of ‘acting white’ (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). They can be critiqued for their speech patterns, the way that they dress and the choices of their extracurricular activities - yet, selling out and forgetting their black identity is not an option as it may impact their existence in their community. Simultaneously, stereotype threat and imposter syndrome work against them finding footing in these often competitive environments. Black students internalize perceived negative stereotypes about their academic abilities (Aronson & Steele, 1995), fight hard to feel that they belong in spaces for gifted and talented students (Clance & Imes, 1978), and can disengage from their academic endeavors, avoid evaluative situations, feel inadequate, and have an unhealthy obsession with succeeding (Ross Stewart, Mugge, & Fultz, 2001; Peteet, Montgomery & Weekes, 2015).

### **Black Queer Male Experiences**

Much of the research on Black queer males in education does not speak to the identity negotiations at play during their K-12 studies. On top of dealing with the negative imagery that surrounds Black male heterosexual identities, Black queer males must also battle with issues in regard to their sexual orientation and homophobia that exists within the Black community (Strayhorn, Blakewood, & Devita, 2008). There is then a consistent battle for Black queer boys and men as they search to find spaces within their school settings and within the larger Black community. This often leads to Black queer men having to negotiate or rank their racial and sexual identities, many of who choose to rank the former first (Christian, 2005).

When it comes to school, sexual orientation is a perceived hurdle for Black queer men in building bonds or finding commonalities with their peers and with their professors (Goode-Cross & Good, 2008). Even when there are other Black queer males in their shared educational spaces and smaller pockets of the community may form among them, Black queer males fear being outed and the various stigmas attached to the visibility of some of these bonds (Mitchell & Means, 2014; Goode-Cross & Good, 2009; Patton, 2011). The experiences in building and finding community can then cause many Black queer men to deal with the psychological implications of not being able to be their full selves in academic spaces; this can look like feelings of loneliness, lower self-esteem, exhaustion from trying to remain closeted, and not feeling fully integrated into their schooling experiences (Crawford, Allison, Zamboni & Soto, 2002; Goode-Cross & Good, 2008, 2009; Patton, 2011).

This psychological trauma then impacts how some Black queer boys and men are able to survive and thrive in and beyond many educational spaces. O'Donnell et al. (2011) points to increased levels of suicide among Black and Latinx gay youth compared to that of their white peers. In the media, we see young Black queer boys like Nigel Shelby committing suicide due to bullying over their sexual orientation. Cray et al. (2013) explores the disproportionate rate of homelessness by Black and Latinx LGBTQ youth. Sutter & Perrin (2016) moves beyond this into adulthood and notes, "individuals who have been rejected by friends and are treated unfairly by employers and/or other important people, even strangers, may be at risk for increased mental health problems, such as depression, anxiety, and to a lesser extent, reduced satisfaction with life" when thinking about LGBTQ people of color (p. 102). With these facts in mind, it is important to think about how issues that exist in K-12 can persist beyond one's educational experiences and into their post-secondary or collegiate lives.

### **Black Male Teacher Experiences**

Currently, Black male teachers make up roughly 2% of the American teacher population (NCES, 2012). Often times, Black male educators walk into the classroom with the baggage of their K-12 years through their undergraduate and early teaching careers. While they often serve as role models for those from communities and backgrounds similar to their own, their presence is beneficial to all students that they encounter (Bryan & Ford, 2014; Milner & Tenore, 2010). Increasing the number of Black male teachers and mentors then becomes a necessity as it can aid in the decrease of Black male students falling victim to the school to prison pipeline (Dancy, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003), potentially reduce the racial achievement gap (Noguera, 2009), and generally help in diversifying the teacher population as a whole. Interestingly, when Black males do enter into the workforce, they are often boxed into occupying spaces of authority in schools (Bristol, 2014).

While there are discussions in the research community around the need for more Black male teachers to enter the classroom, heteronormative pictures of what the Black male teacher should be often dominates these discussions. Woodson and Pabon (2016) note that a good Black male teacher is "heterosexual, normatively gendered, and expresses himself in traditionally masculine ways" (p. 58). Brockenbrough (2012) posits that Black men have "historically strained relationships to dominant notions of American manhood" and there is a need to "explore Black men's unique and precarious negotiations of hegemonic masculine discourses in the teaching profession" (p. 3). With that in mind, Black male teachers experience tension as a result of the patriarchal influences that permeate multiple aspects of the lives both inside and outside of the

classroom. It then becomes important for us to think about how we are continuing to build a narrative of the bridge for Black male teachers as students in K-12 and their professional lives. More specifically, while work has been done to think about the experiences of the Black male teacher, less work specifically functions as a space to examine the intersecting identities of being Black, queer and gifted males transitioning into teaching.

## Methods

### Research Design

Autoethnography is “an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience” (Ellis, 2004). I employ autoethnography as a means to write “epiphanies” or “reflections” on past experiences that are “perceived to have significantly impacted the trajectory of a person’s life, times of existential crisis that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience, and events after which life does not quite seem the same” (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010, p. 3). Boylorn (2014) argues that autoethnography is a “useful method for introducing and discussing controversial topics related to social identity, especially for marginalized folk” (p. 315). More specifically, I situate this work as a critical autoethnography; Boylorn & Orbe (2016) note that critical autoethnographers “[acknowledge] the inevitable privileges we experience alongside marginalization and to take responsibility for our subjective lenses through reflexivity” (p. 15). As a result, it becomes important to put this method alongside Critical Race Theory and Methodology.

Solórzano & Yosso (2002) argue that “critical race theory in education is a framework or set of basic insights, perspectives, methods, and pedagogy that seeks to identify, analyze, and transform those structural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant racial positions in and out the classroom” (p. 25). In their work they identify at least five elements that undergird this work. In framing this specific work, I first focus on the “intercentricity of race and racism with other forms of subordination” which centers Crenshaw’s (1991) *intersectionality* as critical to understandings how racial analyses converge with one’s gender, class, and sexuality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 25). Additionally, this work challenges dominant ideology and works to “erect notions of neutral and objective research and exposes the deficit informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 26).

I examine critical moments during my K-12 education and my first two years of teaching to think about how Whiting’s Scholar Identity Model impacted my learning and teaching. It is then important to note that these reflections here are that of my own and may not be reflective or generalizable to the experiences of other Black queer male educators who were labeled gifted. In this telling, I practice counterstorytelling to provide a different view into the experiences of Black Male Teachers. Counterstorytelling challenges dominant narratives by promoting otherwise unheard experiences and serve as a “tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of race privilege” (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32).

### Data Analysis and Collection

In the spirit of the autoethnographic methodology, I am the subject of this exploration. This work and reflection came to fruition when students from my first two years of teaching

found me on Instagram. As I searched for throwback Thursdays (#tbt) to post for them, it pushed me to reflect not only on my experiences teaching them but also my own educational experiences. To that end, I explored pictures, yearbooks, report cards, and other artifacts from my time as a K-12 student and my first two years as a teacher. Using Whiting's framework for scholar identity, I organized these artifacts and made connections between K-12 moments and moments during these first two years as a teacher. I then wrote vignettes that went with each set of pairs for the artifacts chosen. Each of the paired vignettes explores specific parts of Whiting's (2006) framework to place my specific lived experience as a Black, Gay, and gifted student/teacher; most specifically, as mentioned earlier in this work, I explore his conceptions of Black male role models, masculinity, focusing on achievement, and internal locus of control (which I articulate as feeling safe). In order to protect the identities of those mentioned in this work, pseudonyms are used. By engaging in this specific mode of analysis and reflection, autoethnography helps us to see the impact not only of reflection but examine how interactions between people help to shape one's own views and experiences. Ellis and Bochner (2011) push us to see that "autoethnography is one of the approaches that acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research, rather than hiding from these matters or assuming they don't exist" (p. 2).

This work was guided by the following research question: How can we explore the relationship between of K-12 educational experiences on the teaching practices and relationships of a Black queer teacher?

### **Researcher Positionality**

Given my lived experience as a Black gay male who was identified as gifted, it is important for me to share my positionality and how it informed the approach and analysis of this work. I was identified as gifted in New York City Public Schools in Pre-K through cognitive testing. After elementary school, I tested into both my middle school program and a specialized high school. In my Pre-Kindergarten to Eighth Grade education, I was one of a few black males. While I did not come out formally until I was in college, I did have a small community of Black queer males who attended my specialized high schools. Despite these points, I flourished academically and socially in each environment.

Upon becoming a teacher after college, while I did not hide my sexuality from my colleagues, I did not formally come out to any student that I taught. Being a middle school English teacher in predominantly Black urban schools in the northeast, west and south, where religiosity, homophobia, anti-intellectualism often converged, I had to negotiate my multiple identities depending on who I was speaking to and engaging with.

I share these experiences to highlight not only my personal connection to the topic but also to specifically set the tone that negotiating multiple and often intersecting identities was something that was critical to my survival at multiple points in my educational and professional journeys. These negotiations shaped my relationship to being schooled and schooling. The themes and vignettes that follow highlight some of these moments where multiple aspects of my identity intersect and how it impacted my ability to thrive as either a student or a teacher.

## Recollections and Remembrances: Student to Teacher

### Black Male Role Models

**Fifth grade fatherless.** I did not know my father. He could have walked by me every day on the way to school and I would not have known. My uncles all lived in Jamaica and my effeminate ways made me vastly different than my male cousins. I never had a male teacher. The lack of a persistent and influential male role model only seemed to be exacerbated by my extremely feminine and bookish ways. Despite the small number of Black male students (and Black students in general), my white female teachers were always welcoming and supportive of our growth and development. Mrs. Frames gave me books whenever I went to her classroom, Mrs. Nurk pushed me to the performing arts at a young age, and Mrs. Price pushed me to read beyond my level through a competitive reading system. But, there was one teacher, Mrs. Cilantro who really pushed me to see my true potential. She consistently acknowledged my intellect and affirmed my feelings as a child of an immigrant (as she was one herself). In her class, I slowly gained the self-confidence and began to reconcile the different portions of who I was to become. It was Mrs. Cilantro that pushed me to take the admissions test for one of our district middle school gifted programs and apply for a program for gifted learners to gain access to private schools for upper middle and high school.

In my limited pre-internet research of boarding school and visions of what it looked like in television, I thought that this would be the escape that I needed. Quirky and smart people go to private, boarding schools; I thought that this would be my place to not have to battle so many of these competing interests. In my mind, it would become a place that I could recreate myself and potentially find a “father” away from home. I pushed my mom to follow through on the process - I took a written exam, I took an IQ test (twice - I told the psychologist that I was tired the first time), and then was called into an interview.

At the interview, I first met with two instructors for the course - a white male and a white woman. Both engaged me in my love of reading and spoke about the program. With each interview, I felt even more excited by the possibility. My final interview was with a Black woman whose role was unknown to me. We started off talking about some of the same things as the previous interviews before things took a turn for the worse. The interviewer then asked me, “Whom do you live with?” I told her, “My mother, my grandmother, and my little brother,” to which she replied, “Where is your father?” This was the first time that someone in a school setting asked me this question. I told her that I did not know which led her to ask me why didn’t I know. In my sassy 5th grader way, I told her that she should ask my mother that question. The interview would end shortly after that and I would ultimately be denied admission and head off to the gifted programming in my district.

I felt sad. The story I was building in my mind slowly came to an end. I was smart and that is what I thought the program was all about. Several of my friends who came to the gifted program would leave after 6th grade to begin the adventure that I wanted for myself. What did coming from a “non-conventional” home have to do with my ability to succeed? Was I too effeminate? Did my lack of a father mean that I was not manly enough and therefore undeserving? While it may not have been the “nail in the coffin,” I couldn’t help but think that I needed to work to extra hard to overcome my circumstances. Unconsciously, I created a rigid boundary between home and school to prevent this from happening in the future. A lack of a

father or father-figure was not to be discussed and I needed to find ways to shine despite being different from my male peers in so many ways.

**Ninth grade father.** Walking into the classroom, I had always felt that I would have closer bonds with my female students as most of my close friends were female and I had spent the majority of my schooling career being judged for the perception of my sexual identity. During my second year of teaching, I had become known by lots of the male students in the school because of my work with our boys' dance team and several males in my class took a quick liking to me. I acquired several school sons, but Deon somehow became my favorite. A witty, tall and wiry Black boy, Deon was known to be a rough troublemaker. He often spoke in class when he should have been doing independent work and always had an excuse for why his work was not up to the level of his ability. We spent many an afternoon together when he was kicked out of computers or math with him cleaning my room and trying to apologize for letting me down for kicking him out of class. Quickly, he began to affectionately refer to me as “pops.” During this time, I would have my very first openly gay student, Tommy. Having come from the disciplinary school, Tommy was feared by most of his peers for his sharp wit and fast hands. Shortly after Tommy’s arrival, Deon and I were having one of our usual conversations when he brought up Tommy. “Mr. S, you think Tommy is gay?” Deon asked. I replied that I do not know and it was not my place to judge. I noted that anyone around him could be gay, even his family members so that he should not be so quick to judge. Deon promptly replied, “If my father or anyone in my family is gay, I would kill him.” I immediately put up a wall. Despite being “Pops,” I had to maintain my space so that I wouldn’t become outed or allow our relationship to be tarnished. I silenced myself in many ways with Deon that afternoon.

Six months later, Deon and Tommy graduated and went off to the same high school while I moved to California for graduate school and left the classroom behind. In our parting meeting, Deon’s mom told me that I needed to talk to my “son” since I was the only one who could get through to him. We spoke and I told him to call me whenever he needed. Shortly after school began for him, I got a call from Deon telling me about the new school year and how he was acclimating. In this conversation, he told me that he and Tommy had become good friends, despite his early hesitance. Since I was no longer with him as a teacher, I decided to come out to Deon. He quickly responded, “Why didn’t you tell me before?” I recounted the conversation we had the year before to which he said, “Oh, that was 8th grade. Now that I am in ninth grade, I have matured and no matter what, you will always be pops.” The moment made me feel whole; in a school setting, someone saw me for the Black queer caring person that I spent time diffusing and hiding to stay safe.

**Relating to the Literature.** In these vignettes above, questions of masculinity and conceptions of what it meant to have and be a role model converge in interesting ways. As a student, it was not until this moment did I see how having a role model might have been something to protect and guide me. Brockenbrough (2012) explores this notion of dealing with the psychological well-being of Black boys in resisting or relating to their Black male teachers. While the interaction in fifth grade was with a Black woman, whom I often found safety with given the matrilineal household of my youth, her questioning of my lack of father tapped into a place of insecurity, further building walls that I had with others around being a Black boy and fatherless.

As a teacher, having continued to keep up my guard, impacted my assumptions and the ways in which I initially engaged with some of my Black male students, especially those who were overtly masculine or subscribed to heteronormative versions of what it meant to be a Black

boy. Brockenbrough (2012) notes, “while an emotional distance from students may resemble the constructions of ruggedness and rationality traditionally associated in the west with hegemonic masculinity, it could also be seen as a self-preserving – and therefore strategic and perhaps valuable – avoidance by some Black male teachers of the enormous psychological weight of filling the father figure void in the lives of Black students” (p.13). In continuing to keep up this wall, I worked to not only keep myself safe from any ridicule from students, but I was able to try and maintain a level of masculine performance because they could not “see” my gayness since I did not articulate it publicly.

Relatedly, my wall-building was specifically related to masculine performance and its ability to influence my experiences with those around me. Whiting speaks to this idea of being willing to make sacrifices as critical to having a scholar identity. He asserts that those with a scholar identity are “more likely to let go of some aspects of a social life...and other potential distractions (e.g., TV) to reach desired goals” (Whiting, 2009, p. 55). In my case, these sacrifices manifested themselves in how I performed my version of Black male identity in certain spaces to not appear as if I was not enough due to my lack of role model and subscription to specific constructions of what Black males should engage with both academically and socially. Even though I did not put things on hold from a social perspective, it is important to note how suppressing different points of my identities became critical to my success in school, perhaps especially by influencing my interactions with peers. I realized, also, that this performance was integral to my future orientation (also discussed by Whiting). As a student, walls centered around home lacking a role model and, as a teacher, these walls would center around not exposing what I perceived as an inadequacy: the inability or unwillingness to perform hegemonic constructions of Black masculinity.

### **A Focus on Achievement**

**Baseball didn’t work.** As an elementary school student, I was always afraid to play sports because I did not want to break my glasses. Growing up in a Jamaican household, one that is stereotypically homophobic, only exacerbated some of the angst that I began to feel as my peers began having “girlfriends” and engaging in heteronormative behaviors. I came upon the picture of my summer of playing baseball in 1991. Awkwardly holding the bat and my eyes covered by the ball, I reflected on my experience of what brought me to be on the field. I tried to play baseball to fit in with the other males in my class and to live up to the expectations of my older cousins who were both on the verge of becoming major league baseball players in the 1980s. With each and every practice, I never got better. I hit a foul ball once. My cousins came to practice with me but told my mother that I was hopeless. No matter what I tried, I was hopeless. Usually, I was not one to give up on anything that I tried, but on one summer day, I decided that I should acknowledge that this was not something at which I was going to be successful. Placed in the outfield in the middle of a hot summer day, I tried everything that I could to be benched. As soon as the coach realized that I was not doing anything, he quickly pulled me back in. My mother, bewildered, asked what was wrong to which I quickly replied, “Thank God! It’s too hot out there.” She was furious. My cousin, Keisha, spent time calming her down and being a buffer between my mother and I as we walked back home after the game. I dropped out of baseball that day but knew I needed to find a way back into my mother’s good graces.

A few short weeks later, I headed back to school. When third grade began, I made the conscious decision to focus on being the smart, well behaved, Black boy with impeccable penmanship. Keeping up with my classmates (who were for the vast majority white) by pretending to be the uber-masculine (stereotypical) Black male was not in line with what I wanted for myself. I actively shifted any conversation to academics to deflect my family from focusing on my quiet love of dance over baseball and provided the accolades that fell in line with their vision of coming to this country; that I would do better and move farther than they did.

**Pedigree for protection.** I would later stumble upon the yearbook from my first year of teaching. Six weeks into class, I received a new student, Cameron. Smart and officially labeled “mentally gifted”, Cameron had the intellectual acumen and prowess that made me see so much of myself in him. While that was the case, it was also clear that Cameron wanted to fit in with his peers in his new school. One day during independent practice, he began to sing “Mr. S is so gay he’s in my face every day.” After kicking him out of class, I quickly went to my computer and printed my resume. While his language was offensive, I had worked so hard to shield myself from such egregious language by obtaining degrees from top colleges and universities. I did not know how to channel my thoughts to call out his language, but I knew how to protect my pedigree. At the sound of the bell for seventh period, I took my resume to my Assistant Principal and told her that I had “marketable skills” and that with my pedigree I could leave and quickly find a new job. With this statement, she quickly moved from wavering on even giving him in-school suspension to ensuring that he served three days out of school. Similar to my experiences in K-12, I realized that being a strong Black male teacher was the key to my success in that school; if the administration saw me as someone with good classroom management and good test scores, I would be able to leverage that whenever something was needed.

When Cameron returned to school from his suspension, I would have the first chance to meet his foster mother, Mrs. Brown. She was a minister and had taken Cameron in when he was a young boy because his mother could not take care of him. In front of his mother, Cameron had a different demeanor. She admonished him for treating his first Black male teacher in such a way, against the very Christian values she raised him to uphold. He was forced to give me an apology. In the coming months, Cameron would become one of my closest and most accomplished students.

**Relating to the literature.** In revisiting these parallel moments as a Black gay male student and teacher, I was able to explore some of the complex negotiations and important nuances that emerge when taking sexuality into account in Whiting’s (2006) Scholar Identity model. While his model does not speak specifically to sexual identity, Whiting’s framing of masculinity is of particular interest when thinking about my relationship to my peers versus my students. For Whiting (2009), Black and Hispanic males who exhibit a scholar identity “do not equate being intelligent or studious or talented with being “feminine” or “unmanly;” rather, he notes that “these diverse males believe that males are intelligent and that being gifted or intelligent does not subtract from their sense of masculinity or self-worth in any way” (p. 56). As a student and a child, while smart, my conception of masculinity as a budding gay Black male was tied to conventional definitions of masculinity.

While I still thrived, there were constant tensions at play in my interactions with my peers that affected my ability to truly thrive in some environments. Brockenbrough (2012) suggests that it is important that we examine “patriarchal notions of gender as the products of lifelong socialization processes that indelible, though not necessarily, immutable, imprints on Black men’s gender identity and ideologies” (p.29). As a teacher who was already out to his peers and

colleagues, while some of the same fears from childhood emerged, I ultimately knew my worth and that even with being called gay by students, I had earned my place. Accepting my sexual identity and beginning to put it alongside my scholar identity then became crucial to my success in the classroom; this would be a critical stop on the lifelong journey that Brockenbrough asserts.

While I had reconciled the relationship between my scholar identity, racial, and sexual identities, it is important to also note how part of this process came with a negotiation and, often times, devaluing of one identity over another. This ranking of identities, as Christian (2005) explores, of my academic identity above my sexual identity became a place of safety. If I were smart, then no one would focus on the fact that I was also gay. My experience with Cameron, who was a Black gifted male, forced me to begin to reconcile my racial, academic and sexual identities. As a teacher, I could not hide behind my academic self or relate solely to students because we shared the same racial identity because it would not be authentic. Ladson-Billings (2009) posits that “prospective teachers do not easily relinquish beliefs and attitudes about themselves or others” (p. 143). Cameron forced me to see how I needed to begin to understand who I was as a Black, gay, college-educated male entering the teaching profession in a different environment that I myself learned.

### **Connections for Safety**

**Dancing and SINGing for my life.** In middle school, I began to dance. Instead of gym, we were placed in Ms. Schroeder’s hip hop dance class. Dancing became the thing that won all of the attention of the girls. School functions would be the place I was known to “cut a rug” and do all of the latest moves. But it was in high school that I began to see the need to use dance to aid in my acquisition of social capital for safety.

In high school, I choreographed and danced in a student competition called SING. Through this student-led show, I made friends with many of the popular girls across class years. As a result, several male classmates knew that I was critical to their ability to snag the girl of their dreams. During our junior year, we had a serious chance of winning so I needed to ensure that our dances were not simply amazing but also included people and songs that would not be expected. While I was friends with some of the football players from middle school, I was not close to them. But, I knew that having football players in our dances would make a huge difference. Using the relationships I had with my female classmates, I got several football players to agree to be in our dance. Through working with them in a medium that I was passionate about (similar to their love of football), I garnered their respect. While we did not win that year, I gained several close male friends from the football team.

That summer, I would also go through my first “breakup” with a boy. Some of my friends knew that it was not going well and to my surprise, it would be these same football players who would come to my aid. One day after their practice, I heard someone calling my name from the street. It was Dave, the biggest player in my class who was headed to be the captain that year. Dave and about ten other players demanded to come to my apartment because they wanted to ensure that I was okay and let me know that if I needed someone to be “dealt with” that they were only a phone call away.

**Boys dance leader.** My first year of teaching, our school only had a girls dance group. Since they already had an advisor, I let go of leading a group. Somehow, my students found out that I used to dance when I was in college. As a result, some of the boys begged me to begin a group for them. To be honest, I was quite nervous. Seeing that I did not really engage in

activities with other boys in middle school, the idea of working with middle schools boys was a rough transition. Little did I know that this would be a testament to patience and relationship building for me.

While excited, the boys had lots of energy. One student, London, was a 7th grader that I did not teach then (but would teach when he was in the 8th grade). Doing the Wu-Tang to Baltimore club music was what my students did for dance; this was not only foreign to me as someone who did hip-hop and African dance but also as an outsider to Philadelphia. In order to catch up, I had my female students teach me how to do the Wu-Tang during lunch. The boys were often late or skipped practice so consistency was hard to maintain. As much as I grew to love this time, it became frustrating that the boys did not seem to take me and/or dance as seriously as I had hoped.

As Black History Month approached, I was tasked to lead the program along with my mentor, Mrs. Soldier. I thought that this would be the perfect chance for the school to see what the boys could do. I wrangled them and hounded them to come to practice. I committed to being their surprise guest and coming out to dance with them on the stage so that they would feel comfortable in front of an auditorium of their peers. On the day of the show, we wowed the crowd. Everyone screamed as we came on stage. The girls told me that they wished I were their coach (which I would later become). While hard, through dance, I was able to see that I can build a connection with my boys while helping them to see the art form as an acceptable (and popularity boosting) outlet for their energy and interests.

**Relating to the Literature.** In a divergence from the scholar identity model, having a need for affiliation was as important in having a need to achieve as a Black gay teacher and/or student. Building off the work of McClelland (1961), Whiting says that for Black and Hispanic males who possess a scholar identity “the need for achievement must be greater/stronger than the need for affiliation” (p. 55). While achievement was surely a high priority while both a teacher and a student, affiliation brought safety and acceptance. Much like Whiting suggests, being popular was not the goal; rather, a need to be accepted as a Black gay person was critical to seeing some of my achievement to fruition. Growing up, being associated or accepted by those who were popular slowly shielded me from being teased or picked on. I strategically chose activities and became aware of how my presence in social circles could be to my benefit. Seeing that I was in a relatively sheltered gifted environment for the majority of my schooling, being smart or achieving were not seen as bad where being gay could impact my ability to feel accepted and thrive. Transitioning to teaching in a large urban school environment, where I was not shielded by my intellect or even the privilege that I earned going to college, aligning myself with particular students and/or activities gave me the social capital necessary to thrive and put my intellectual and racial pride on display.

### Conclusion and Implications

In examining these themes and vignettes, it is important to acknowledge how my own understanding of intersectionality and the multiple identities and perspectives that I hold came to fruition through these interactions. Nash (2008) posits that identity politics often ignores some of the intra-racial differences that exist in monolithic descriptions of racial backgrounds. Instead, Nash notes that we should expose and explore broader categories of identity to see the tensions that exist for those who sit in the spaces within and between multiple identities. My experiences demonstrate how I often lived in one space without seeing the multiple parts of myself, many

times to my detriment. It was through these experiences as a student and a teacher that more complex negotiations of identity took place and I could begin to see the nuances of my own identity and think more broadly about how my racial, gender, intellectual, and sexual identities crossed to not only help me thrive but also that of the students that I taught.

Definitions of masculinity, while in the background of these conversations, did not drive the ability to thrive. Rather, being myself allowed for those around me to see my primary identities as Black and gifted and not to focus on my sexuality as I grappled with how to put it on display. As a student, thriving academically, being super engaged in the school, and delineating clear home/school boundaries, aided my inability to negotiate potentially competing identities. As a teacher, it became clear that these same strategies employed as a student were not only critical to my success but as a model for the potentially Black, gay, and gifted students in my class. As both a student and teacher, controlling narratives became critical to the ways in which I, as a Black, gay and gifted student and teacher, could persist and thrive in a space not set up for my success.

As we begin to think about the intersectionality that exists for many Black boys, it is important that we continue to parse out some of those differences; in this case, it is around conceptions of masculinity and sexuality. While Whiting's (2006) scholar identity model is an important lens for thinking about thriving for Black and Hispanic males who are gifted, it is constrained by not thinking about the multiple intersecting identities that Black and Hispanic males embody. As evidenced through some of the reflections mentioned above, being gay impacted decision making and the choices I made as a gifted student in ways that I am sure other identities might impact other Black and Hispanic gifted males as they traverse the road from student to teacher. Whiting's conception of masculinity should be broadened to think about the ways in which one's sexuality or sexual awakening might impact their vision of what is masculine and allowing Black and Brown boys the ability to still thrive in their academic environments. Promoting a monolithic Black male identity for Black gifted boys leaves no room for any exploration academically, socially, sexually, racially. By setting forth spaces for exploration and support, Black queer gifted males will have the ability to shine and thrive in ways that promote not only their race pride, but also centers their intellectual and queer identities as having assets that should be celebrated in society.

As a former classroom teacher, I aim to connect our personal stories with the narratives of gifted students of color that we teach or mentor. Scholars like Brockenbrough (2012) and Bryan and Ford (2014) begin to explore some of the transitions and experiences of Black gifted and/or queer boys who become teachers, but we must begin to think more critically about these transitions and experiences. As the push to increase the number of Black male teachers continues through the work of scholars like Travis Bristol and organizations like The Fellowship, conversations around these intersections are going to be imperative as we think about building pipelines for the future generation of Black male educators. As part of these discussions, it is important that organizations do not play into respectability politics and the traditional definitions of Black masculinity. By beginning to explore and expose the multiple identities of Black male teachers, we can complicate notions associated with Blackness, queerness, intellectual ability that often sit in conversations around the Black male student and teacher experiences. Having clearer conversations around these topics and leaving the space for these Black queer male teachers to share themselves without having to diminish any part of themselves.

As these experiences come to the fore, future research should begin to examine several important questions: (1) What impact does having a Black queer male of color as a teacher have

on the students in the classroom?; (2) How does a teacher's lived experiences with negotiating multiple marginalized identities impact their teaching persona?; (3) How does one's school environment as a student and a teacher impact their decision-making as related to identity politics and negotiation?; and (4) How have identity negotiations of Black queer and gifted teachers positively and negatively impacted their career trajectories? More work needs to be done to examine the impact that Black and Brown women/girls serve as key allies in the development and protection of Black Queer gifted male teachers and students. How might we see these affirming safe people and spaces as key to their success in terms of community building and role models as suggested by Whiting? By engaging in questions like this, we can begin to examine the ways in which intersectionality begins to impact the ways in which Black queer males navigate through their educational trajectories.

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