Call and response: how narratives of black queer youth inform popular discourses of the ‘boy crisis’ in education

Lance T. McCready

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

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Lance T. McCready*

Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada

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The shift in attention to the ‘boy crisis’ has been fuelled by a spate of popular trade books dealing with raising of boys and the alleged failures and deceptions of feminist educational reforms. This article argues that from a black feminist perspective the ‘boy crisis’ depicted in these texts is a misnomer because no social problem can be understood through a single lens of difference. Rather, through an analysis of the narratives of gay and gender non-conforming black male students, the article argues that the ‘boy crisis’ needs to be approached from an intersectional perspective that rejects essentialist notions of boys and embraces the sociocultural differences among them. In the conclusion, the author provides suggestions for ways teachers can practise this kind of inclusion, termed ‘making space for diverse masculinities’.

Keywords: boys’ education; intersectionality; black queer youth; masculinities; narrative inquiry

Introduction

In many countries around the world, especially wealthier, industrialised countries like the United States, much concern has been expressed about boys and their education (Dillabough, McLeod, and Mills 2008; Johannesson, Lingard, and Mills 2009; Martino 2008; Weaver-Hightower 2003, 2009). This shift in attention towards boys’ educational issues began in the late 1990s, driven largely by mounting empirical evidence that boys’ rates of literacy, overall academic performance and boys’ post-secondary matriculation to college and university are lower than girls’ (Weaver-Hightower 2003). Moreover, boys are prescribed Ritalin and other psychostimulant drugs issued to treat attention deficit disorder and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, disciplined more harshly, and placed in special education classes more often than girls (McCabe, Teter, and Boyd 2004; Oswald et al. 2003; Skiba et al. 2002; Weaver-Hightower 2009). In addition to the empirical evidence, the shift in attention to the ‘boy crisis’ was fuelled by a spate of popular trade books dealing with raising of boys and polemical texts about alleged failures and deceptions of feminist educational reforms (Weaver-Hightower 2009). I will focus on four of these books in this article: Raising Cain by Dan Kindlon, PhD, Michael Thompson, PhD, and Teresa Barker (Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker 2000), which focuses on the emotional ‘miseducation’ of boys; The Minds of Boys by Michael Gurian, a family therapist, and Kathy

*Email: lmccready@oise.utoronto.ca
Stevens (2005), mother and educator, which focuses on the social, emotional, physical and cognitive needs of boys; *Boys Adrift* by Leonard Sax, MD, PhD (2009), which explains how the toxic environment we live in has led to young men failing in school and being disengaged at home; and *The Trouble with Boys* by journalist Peg Tyre (2008), which focuses on why and how the educational system is ‘failing our sons’.

I have always had an interest in these texts because of their popularity. The authors of these books, who by profession are parents, journalists, medical doctors and clinical psychologists, have a much larger impact, in terms of readership, than scholars who publish with academic presses. I have assigned popular trade books in the teacher education classes I teach on issues of gender, sexuality and schooling because I am aware, based on informal conversations during office hours and after class, that pre-and in-service teachers, graduate and undergraduate students, view these books as an important source of information about problems and solutions to boys’ education. They view these texts as ‘more readable’ than the peer-reviewed journal articles that are typically assigned in academic classes.

I am not the first one to bring scholarly attention to popular trade books on the ‘boy crisis’ in education. Mills (2003), for example, refers to these texts as ‘backlash blockbusters’ and writes about how they are informed by an educational agenda in which boys are ascribed the status of victims. He argues that a more productive stance is to consider the ways dominant forms of masculinities cause harm to both boys and girls. Mills’ analysis is important because it shows how the ‘boys as victims’ discourse ‘obscures the privileges which men as a group hold in the current gender order operating in most Western countries’ (69).

My fascination with popular trade books that are focused on the crisis of boys’ education stems from my curiosity of whether or not these texts resonate with my own research on the experiences of gay and gender non-conforming black male students in urban schools (McCready 2004, 2004/2005, 2008, 2009). Do the ways popular writers depict boys, their crisis and the solutions to the crisis resonate with the experiences of black queer youth I interviewed? Given the call to focus on the crisis of boys’ education, what is the response of black queer youth? These questions had not even occurred to me until two years ago at a professional conference where I was encouraged to think about my research in relation to the boys’ education field of study. Until then I had considered social justice-minded researchers, educators and activists in the urban education and black education to be my primary audience.

In the United States, researchers in the urban education and black education fields of study have had a longstanding concern with black boys in K-12 schools. In the early 1980s educator and activist Jawanza Kunjufu published *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys* (1983) in which he argues the ‘conspiracy’ against black males is fundamentally rooted in the need of a white minority to control the world’s far greater population of people of colour. More recently Pedro Noguera (2008) argues that the ‘troubles’ of black boys reflect both structural and cultural factors related to race, class and political economy of urban communities and schools. For Kunjufu, Noguera and the majority of scholars who focus on the troubles of black boys, their explanations of black male failure tend to revolve around issues of poverty, race and class discrimination. The politics of gender related to sexism and masculinity, and the politics of sexuality related to queer youth and heteronormativity, are rarely addressed (McCready 2009). In other words, the representations of black boys in the urban education and black education scholarly literatures tend to essentialise the experiences of black male
students as heterosexual, gender conforming/hypermasculine and living in low-income urban communities (McCready 2010).

Critical scholars in the field of boys’ education focus on the politics of gender and sexuality in their work (e.g. Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli 2005; Mills, Martino, and Lingard 2007), although more recently the politics of race has been addressed in relation to the discourse of the male teacher shortage for black boys (see Martino and Rezai-Rashti 2010). I always assumed the critical scholarship in boys’ education spoke to an audience that was primarily concerned with the lives of white, middle-class boys, rather than non-white boys who live in low-income neighbourhoods. For this reason I never even considered how my research on the challenges facing gay and gender non-conforming black male students could in fact contribute to critical scholarship on boys’ education. Moreover, from the perspective of black feminists and gay men, whose scholarship undergirds much of my work, ‘boys’ is a problematic category of analysis.

Many black feminists and gay male artists, academics and activists view issues of identity, education, politics and culture from an intersectional perspective that takes into account how multiple categories of difference and social identities are interlocking and co-constructed (Collins 2000; Crenshaw 1991; Lorde 1984; Zinn and Dill 1996). Black feminists, in particular, theorise everyday life taking place in a ‘matrix of domination’ where multiple forms of oppression are operating simultaneously (hooks 1984). In this theoretical world, regardless of the statistics that show boys are doing less well across race, class and ethnic groups, no phenomenon in the modern world, including the ‘boy crisis’ in education, can be understood through a single lens of difference. This is not the same thing as saying middle-class boys are not significantly touched by the ‘boy crisis’ in education. Rather, from a black feminist perspective, all issues and problems in education are situated within a matrix of domination where multiple forms of oppression are operating simultaneously.

As a result of viewing everyday life through an intersectional lens, black feminists and gay male writers resist discourses and terms related to ‘boys’, ‘boys’ education’ and ‘boy crisis’ because they essentialise the experiences of boys. This critique of essentialism is not only product of black feminist and gay male thinkers, but is in fact part of a longstanding debate in feminist communities of theorists and philosophers who wrestle with the seeming incompatibility between the need to respect difference on the one hand (e.g. the diversity of women’s experiences) and the need to present a united front for political purposes (Miller 1998; Razack 1998). I have come to believe that the problem of difference is actually what makes the narratives of black queer youth, who embody multiple sociocultural differences, so interesting and potentially productive. The voices of these youth, overlooked because they are so different and seemingly not universal, disrupt normalising discourses inherent in the popular books on the crisis in boys’ education. They can teach us a lot about the possibilities and limitations of this literature to diagnose and treat a ‘boy crisis’ in schools. My approach takes as its starting point the notion of queer youth as pedagogical.

**Queer youth as pedagogical**

Despite the fact that non-white queer youth or queer youth ‘of colour’ have a strong presence in urban communities and schools across the United States, they are often misunderstood, ignored and assaulted (Blackburn 2007; McCready 2004; Quinn
Gay and gender non-conforming black male students, the group of black queer youth I write about most often, can be ‘troubling’ to urban educators because they disrupt the representations, beliefs and practices associated with young black men living in the city (McCready 2008). Maintaining such dismissive view of black queer youth constitutes a missed opportunity for educators to develop more socially just praxes that challenge multiple forms of social and cultural oppression and disrupt the dominant discourses that constrain the lives of young people (McCready 2007). In order for this to happen, however, we must treat the narratives of black queer youth as ‘pedagogical’, meaning they are an important site of ethico-political work that can lead to social change at the individual, institutional and community levels (Blackburn 2009; Rodriguez 1998).

Although personal narratives can be mundanely described as ‘dramatized accounts of events as perceived by the speaker’ (Labov 2001, 86), they can also be vehicles for ethico-political work by serving as counterstories that challenge the dominant story and thus working for social change (Blackburn and McCready 2009). A pedagogical analysis of black queer youth narratives looks at the ways in which youth politically use and appropriate their bodies, language, culture, and myriad representations and ideologies (Rodriguez 1998). To do so suggests that queer youth are engaging in ‘a pedagogical enterprise that can educate us about, among other thing, counter-hegemonic political/pedagogical practices that rupture dominant culture, dominant practices, and dominant assumptions’ (Rodriguez 1998, 175). The narratives of gay and gender non-conforming black male youth, in particular, have the potential to disrupt dominant notions of who boys are, the challenges they face in school and the ways schools can be more inclusive of boys. Taking these disruptions seriously enables educators and policymakers to ‘make space’, both at a conceptual and programmatic level, for more diverse masculinities (McCready 2008, 2009). This is an important, yet neglected, area of work in the popular literature on the crisis in boys’ education that I will explain more fully in the conclusion to this article.

**Methods and setting of black queer youth narratives**

In the Fall of 1997 I embarked on an independent, ethnographic investigation of black gay male students’ participation in extracurricular activities in an urban high school located in a small Northern California city in the United States. The goal of my research was to understand the interplay between the structural dimensions of race and gender segregation in extracurricular activities and in identity formation. I focused on two activities in my ethnographic research: Project 10, an extracurricular social/support group for queer students; and the African Dance Program (ADP), an extracurricular performing arts class that fulfilled the physical education requirement.

I was drawn to Project 10, in part, because of my prior work with queer youth in social service agencies and community-based organisations. Although I had done anti-homophobia/heterosexism trainings in New York City public schools, I had never worked directly with a social/support group for queer students housed in a high school. I was especially curious about how students of colour fared in Project 10. After attending a few meetings I learned that students of colour did not participate in this group. Their absence led me to interview black gay males who chose not to attend Project 10 meetings.
The overall goal of my fieldwork with black gay male students was to get a sense of their everyday lives in the school environment, particularly in relation to Project 10 and the ADP. Towards that end I spent the 1997–1998 academic year observing Project 10 meetings at least once a month. During that time I informally spoke with the faculty advisor on several occasions during lunch, after school or during Diversity Project meetings (she was a member of the Extended Team). I also spoke with Project 10 students on several occasions after meetings, in the hallways and after school. Overall, I would estimate I spoke to over 20 students who participated in Project 10. I recorded my observations and key events, in a field notebook on the spot, during and after Project 10 meetings and hallway conversations (Sanjek 1990). More formal interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed. I interviewed two black gay males for my study of Project 10. I met the two interviewees through the faculty advisor and my own informal social networks. One of the young men had graduated from the school and the other was attending the school during the time of the interviews. The interviews lasted anywhere from 60 to 120 minutes and took place on the premises of the school if the young man was a student at Parkwood High School (PHS), or at a local coffee shop if he was a graduate.

My ethnographic presence in the ADP was more extensive than in Project 10. I observed ADP classes over a longer period of time, approximately two academic years, 1998–1999 and 2000–2001. I spent most of that time observing classes twice a week for a total of two hours per week. I also stage-managed the 1998 and 2001 African dance concerts and periodically provided administrative assistance to the ADP instructor. During this time I set out to observe black gay male students in as many dance classes as possible. I ended up focusing on an advanced dance class that met twice a week for up to four hours. Over a six-month period in 2001 I took copious field notes on the experiences of three black male participants, two of whom were gay-identifying and one, the same student I interviewed in 1999, who was heterosexual-identifying. I also attended the advanced ADP students’ performances at local community centres and elementary and middle schools.

The focus on a small number of students facilitated the goals of the research to (1) describe the everyday lives of black gay male youth in a North American urban high school as they navigate academic and extracurricular programmes segregated by race and sex; and (2) theorise the ways multiple forces of marginalisation, discrimination and/or oppression affect gay and gender non-conforming2 black male students, including their responses or ways of coping with those forces. Ultimately I believe black gay male students were engaged in a struggle to attain power, privilege and prestige in a school setting where only certain identifications were accepted and legitimated by students and teachers. What are the implications of these experiences for the ‘boy crisis’ in education?

Having introduced the methods and setting through which I obtained the narratives of black queer youth, in the next section I present them in relation to the four popular trade books described earlier in this article: Raising Cain by Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker (2000); The Minds of Boys by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens (2005); Boys Adrift by Leonard Sax (2009); and The Trouble with Boys by Peg Tyre (2008). I compare and contrast how these authors and the black queer youth I interviewed address the following three questions:

(1) Which boys are in crisis?
(2) How have schools contributed to the ‘boy crisis’?
(3) What can schools do to be more inclusive?
Which boys are in crisis?

In a research monograph written for the Ontario Literacy and Numeracy Secretariat on boys’ underachievement, Wayne Martino (2008) makes the following provocative statement: ‘Not all boys are underachieving, nor are all girls out-performing boys; educators and policy makers need to address the question of which boys require help becoming literate and what kinds of help educators can provide’ (1). Martino’s call for a more nuanced analysis of which boys require help becoming literate suggests that not all boys are in crisis and that some boys might be doing ok. He embraces ‘the problem of difference’ discussed earlier in this article. Martino’s position, however, is markedly different from the authors of popular literature on the ‘boy crisis’. These authors consistently take the position that the ‘boy crisis’ affects all boys across race, ethnicity and class groups. Moreover, the popular authors are quick to make this point early on, in the opening chapters. The following are some examples of this phenomenon.

In The Trouble with Boys, Peg Tyre (2008) states that:

Almost every ill that befalls schoolchildren in America – from learning disabilities to dropout rates, to rickets – disproportionately affects poor and black and Hispanic children. And the boy problem is no exception. We should not downplay the heavy burden that poverty and racism place on poor kids and kids of color. That said … boys in every racial subgroup do worse than girls in school even though they come from identical environments. (45)

In this quote she acknowledges the importance of understanding how both race and class differences affect ‘[a]lmost every ill that befalls school children’ but instead of addressing these differences she dismisses them (‘That said …’) because she is intent on making the point that boys, as a group, are doing worse than girls.

Another example of this position, and the persuasive way it is written, occurs in The Minds of Boys by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens (2005). Gurian and Stevens state: ‘The issues boys face in school cross economic and ethnic groups. Although it might be politically tempting to say that upper-income white males must be doing well, that is in fact not a given’ (21). Here again Gurian and Stevens eschew the possibility that boys’ ethnicity and class could significantly inform the issues they face in school. Leonard Sax (2009) makes a similar argument in Boys Adrift when he tells the reader:

As you and I review what’s known about this problem, we will see that the problem of boys disengaging from school and from the American dream is widespread. It affects every variety of community: urban, suburban, and rural; white black, Asian, and Hispanic; affluent, middle-income, and low income. (5)

In Raising Cain, Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker (2000) acknowledge that: ‘Every troubled boy has a different story’ (emphasis added), then quickly remind the reader that: ‘but their stories share a disturbing theme of emotional ignorance and isolation’ (3).

Why do the authors of popular trade books on the ‘boy crisis’ in education assert that all boys are in crisis? I have a couple of theories. First, from their privileged white, middle-class, heterosexual standpoints they may truly believe race, class, gender and sexuality do not matter significantly. Or maybe they downplay the significance of sociocultural differences among boys so not to alienate their primary base of readership who could be described, arguably, as heterosexual, middle-class white women who are mothers of sons. Peg Tyre (2008) strategically describes herself as a ‘researcher’ when she mobilises academic evidence and as a parent when she is
attempting to persuade her readers that she knows ‘what boys need’. She uses the pronouns ‘we’ and ‘our’ to signify her identification with all mothers: ‘… we as parents need to acknowledge to our sons, to our kids’ teachers, and to each other that this is a tricky time to be a boy’ (Tyre 2008, 286, emphasis added). Male authors may employ other strategies to connect to a white middle-class, heterosexual readership. They may talk about their struggles as a white middle-class boy or they incorporate the voices of white middle-class mothers. Michael Gurian’s white middle-class co-author Kathy Stevens, for example, explicitly states that she is ‘not only a professional but also a mother of two sons’ (5).

The narratives of black queer youth, as opposed to popular authors, suggest that race, class and gender differences between boys create different crises among boys. From this perspective, there is not a single boy crisis in education rather there are boy crises (plural) that differ along lines of sociocultural difference. For example, David, a lanky 17-year-old with large, earthy brown eyes and meticulously arched eyebrows when I interviewed him, spoke about how gender differences, specifically being gender non-conforming, affected his experiences in 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’.

Jamal, a trim 5’ 10″, dark brown-skinned young man with a moustache, goatee and sparkling light brown eyes that complemented a short afro, spoke about the importance of class differences in his predominantly black neighbourhood. These differences made him want to live somewhere else more middle class. Looking defeated, he explained to me:

J: Now I’m at the point that I would rather live somewhere else. I would rather not have to walk by drug dealers on the way home. I consider it (where I live) a ghetto, but I guess if you compare it to other [sighs], other communities like in other states … Like maybe by Chicago standards it wouldn’t be a ghetto or New York standards it wouldn’t be a ghetto, but for (me) I mean it’s definitely a ghetto. But, but it’s not just the fact that, it’s not the fact that it’s a black neighbourhood that makes it a ghetto. I mean because there are thriving middle-class black communities in other places. No, but just all my neighbours are on Section 8 and welfare … Growing up in my house, it was totally different. So, it’s like I lived in the ghetto, but my life was different than my neighbours.

Here Jamal compares his experiences in his predominantly black, low-income communities to other poor black neighbourhoods or ‘ghettos’ in large urban centres in the United States like New York and Chicago. He describes the class background of his own family, however, as ‘different’ from his neighbours. From an intersectional perspective, one could argue that Jamal experiences both a sense of marginalisation by living in a low-income neighbourhood and a sense of privilege as a result of growing up in a middle-class family.

Jamal, like David, also spoke about the importance of gender differences among his peers. Some of his peers displayed forms of hegemonic masculinity that were the norm among his peers while others, like Jamal himself, displayed more marginal forms that were ‘different’ from the norm. With some sadness in his eyes, he described his relationship with Durrell, a boy from his neighbourhood:

J: This guy Durrell, like we were friends from fourth grade until age 13. But I mean 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 ride his skate board and I stuck with the skates. And skates were considered, they weren’t considered as like macho. I guess I started to feel different towards 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 what other fifth, sixth, seventh, eighth grade boys styles. And like I would bring my Diana Ross tour books 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 idolising LL Cool J and I was like idolising Diana and Janet you know? Even just, that was just an example as far as music goes of the difference between me and them.

Overall, from an intersectional perspective, the narratives of black queer youth, as opposed to popular authors, suggest that there are multiple sociocultural differences among boys based on race, class, gender and sexuality. These differences are important because when they collide at particular times, in particular contexts they create different kinds of crises for boys in school. For some boys the crisis reflects discrimination based on gender non-conforming behaviour which could be read by peers or the teacher as a sign of being gay. Other boys in the school environment might experience discrimination based on class background read by teachers and administrators as their neighbourhood of residence. Still others might be gender conforming, but experience discrimination based on their perceived race and record of academic achievement. If, from the perspective of black queer youth, there is no one boy crisis, but rather multiple crises, what does this imply about the ways schools contribute to the crisis?

How do schools contribute to the crisis?

I have established that popular authors are less attentive to sociocultural differences among boys and more intent on describing a single ‘crisis’ that affects all boys. It follows from this discourse that there are certain aspects of schools that universally disadvantage boys. For example, Gurian and Stevens (2005) argue that:

Boys are being educated in a system-comprising schools, homes, and communities – that is not well enough briefed on these four crucial elements of education: The male learning style; the potential mismatch of that male learning style with many current educational practices; the complete role parents and communities need to take in any generation and in any culture, to ensure the education of son; new methods, strategies, and teaching techniques that have been proven to work in schools and classrooms that educate boys. (9)

Peg Tyre (2008) claims that middle and high school programmes put boys at a disadvantage by prizing organisation, neat handwriting, collaboration, rule following, physical toughness, independence, self-sufficiency and stoicism (236–42). Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker (2000) observe that all boys contend with a ‘culture of cruelty’ in which

the tv shows he watches, the books he reads, the shoes he wears, the color of his socks, the length of his shorts, the cut of his hair, the sound of his laugh, or the length of his stride, anything a boy says or does that’s different can and will be used against him. (73)

Finally, in Boys Adrift Leonard Sax (2009) makes a case that: ‘The acceleration of the early elementary curriculum, with its emphasis on phonics and reading drills, by itself, might well have created a minor gender crisis in education’ (27). He also claims that
for all boys: ‘Emphasizing book learning versus experiential learning may seriously impair development’ (30).

Taken together, the authors of popular books on the ‘boy crisis’ in education make a strong case that school systems, on the whole, disadvantage boys and privilege girls. What is the response of black queer youth to this analysis? I argue that black queer youth, whose narratives reflect sensitivity to race, class, gender and sexuality differences among boys, describe a range of ways the school environment might contribute to a ‘boy crisis’ in education. For example, some black queer youth describe what could be called a ‘gender crisis’ on account of the fact that school officials fail to interrupt gendered harassment and bullying (Meyer 2008). Kevin, a slender, medium brown, 5’ 10” student with a chameleon’s sense of style, described a particularly harrowing experience that occurred on ‘switch day’:

K: During homecoming the girls dress up as guys and the guys dress up as girls. I took that to the extreme of course! This was when Barbie Boutique was really at its peak. They had an all new Batik, cultural Barbie outfit. I took a little leotard and tight hip huggers and flare at the bottom, some tennis shoes and my hair, I had long hair, so I had got some weave in it too. I got two ponytails and I had on lipstick and all this stuff; I was cute. And, I mean, the whole day went fine. The dudes was messin’ with my titties and stuff and tryin’ to pop them and stuff and it was pretty fun. And so at the end of the day, I’m walkin’ with my friends and there were these dudes who were following me. I just knew something was gonna happen, but I was tryin’ to like, I dunno, not think about it. And I was sitting at the bus stop and then this one dude came up behind me punched me in the eye and ran mind you! I was like fuck! And I was like, [holds his eye and makes whimpering noise], acting like a little fruit, and he ran. That was so weak.

David also spoke about gendered harassment he experienced in school:

D: After I came out to myself and then afterwards, after I got comfortable with it, it gave me the opportunity to say I don’t care about what other people think because for the longest time I did. And um that’s when I started experimenting with a lot of different things like the way I dress, and the way I do my hair, and whatever. My eyebrows, whatever it was. And um, those things were visible and those things I got, I caught hell for. You know, people, I guess whatever it was about me, people you know, associated [it] with, ‘He’s a faggot’, and that’s when the name-calling started up again. And um, it got really bad and it got physical at one point when people started throwing things at me.

In addition to gendered harassment, black queer youth narratives indicate they are negotiating school environments where academic and extracurricular programmes are racially segregated and black students are less likely to graduate and attend a four-year college or university compared to their non-black peers. For Antoine, a 5’ 7” 140-pound senior who had a lisp and was in special education classes, this led him to wonder about whether or not he was meant to graduate and ‘walk the stage’:

A: Some people who don’t graduate, they’re successful. Some people who graduate aren’t. They don’t feel that they’re successful they just feel that ‘I walked the stage’. I think it’s how you see yourself, how you accept things ’cause there are some people who didn’t graduate from high school and they’re very successful right now. Don’t get me wrong, education is important and it is something that you need in life to get a good job, but there are some people who didn’t graduate that have very good communication skills and very good, you know, different types of skills. And then
there are some people who did graduate and they don’t have the skills that some
people have, so I think it’s just how you are, how you learn things, and how you
accept things.

Jamal, who identified as middle class, took advanced academic-level courses and
associated with students who participated in predominantly white extracurricular
activities, was clearly frustrated with the social geography of school. His experiences
differed from the majority of his black peers who were over-represented in low-level
academic classes and tended to participate in predominantly black extracurricular
activities if they participated at all. Interestingly, he laid the blame for the school’s
segregated social dynamic with both students and teachers:

J: It (the school) was tracked. I don’t think it’s tracked anymore, but like, you know
in math classes the lower the classes that weren’t as challenging, it was all black.
And then up to the AP math or whatever was white. It was the same with English.
I think history was mixed, it wasn’t tracked, but like the electives, all the white
students mostly took photography and art with Sandy Wolf who thinks she’s a
liberal, but I don’t think she is; I’ve heard complaints. Dance Production was almost
all white … Look, the white students are all afraid of the black students. Well, not
all of them, but a lot of them. And the black guys are allowed to, some of them, I
mean they’re allowed to like, to fail, to flunk out. There’s a few people that care,
but they’re allowed to like walk around and smoke herb [marijuana] and not go to
class and not care and take less units than they need to be taking. They’re allowed
to say, ‘I’m gonna go to a jc [junior college]’ and ‘I’m not going to school’.

Overall, the narratives of black queer youth seem to tell a different story than authors
of popular books on the ‘boy crisis’ in education. Whereas popular authors assert that
there are particular ways all schools disadvantage boys, black queer youth describe a
more complicated sociocultural landscape of school where, based on their social
identities and cultural practices, some boys enjoy privilege while others are targets of
discrimination. Black queer youth also describe academic and extracurricular
programmes that create crises for some who do not fit within their symbolic boundaries,
while others whose academic orientation aligns with school programmes emerge rela-
tively unscathed. Both of these insights reflect an intersectional perspective that implies
there are various socially and culturally constructed categories of discrimination inter-
acting on multiple and often simultaneous levels for different groups of boys. Needless
to say, popular authors, as a group, paint a different picture of how schools contribute
to the boy crisis in education compared to black queer youth. These differences of course
lead to different implications for how schools can be more inclusive of boys.

What can schools do to be more inclusive of boys?

At this point in the article it is a rather predictable exercise to describe the essentialis-
ing tendencies of the authors of popular trade books on the boy crisis in education.
Still, I think it is important to consider, from this essentialist perspective, the ways
these authors suggest schools can be more inclusive of boys. Gurian and Stevens
(2005), who are among the most practical of the popular trade book authors discussed
here, provide their readers with the following 10 suggestions:

- Formally check in with the boys everyday.
- Get boys involved – Target boys for in-class debates.
• Encourage them – or tell them – to sit near the front of the classroom.
• Modify teaching methods to include less verbal instruction and more hands-on activities while letting nonverbal-, non-writing-type students do more work on the computer than you might otherwise allow.
• Let students move around physically while they are reading.
• Give students soft object to squeeze in their hands constantly so they can keep their brains stimulated physically and avoid the rest state.
• Change school and class schedule to fit the adolescent brain.
• Physical education is an essential subject for student motivation – especially for underperforming males.
• Smaller schools and classrooms help motivate students.
• Provide undermotivated students with a mentor. (272–3)

These suggestions for ways schools can be more inclusive of boys seem to stereotype them as less verbal than girls, competitive, rambunctious and in need of lot’s of physical activity and stimulation, and generally less motivated. Peg Tyre’s (2008) suggestions revolve around these same essentialist ideas of boys, although she focuses more on the role of teachers. She suggests that teachers:

• Fine-tune their lesson plans to make sure they are imparting material in ways that keep boys engaged;
• Keep the physical need of boys in mind by allowing ample recess and free time preferably outdoors;
• Pay special attention to their young male students’ progress in reading and writing by stretching the boundaries of what they themselves might find interesting or acceptable;
• Pay attention to low-performing boys and not write them off;
• See how desperately boys need connection with each other and with adults;
• Construct thoughtful relationships with well-meaning mentors who can help them on their path to manhood;
• Who express hostility toward the natural way in which boys express themselves – even if it is sometimes noisy, noncompliant, squirrely, rambunctious, aggressive, and yes a little irritating – should be removed from the classrooms (and if possible from the profession). (283–4)

In Boys Adrift, Leonard Sax (2009) makes suggestions similar to Gurian and Stevens, and Tyre, in addition to a bold call to ‘restore kindergarten as kindergarten’ and push the emphasis on literacy and numeracy back to where it belongs out of kindergarten and into first and second grade. Here again, Sax implies that boys, in general, develop literacy and numeracy skills later than girls. My point here is not that all of the suggestions made by authors of popular trade books are bad or wrong or ineffective. Rather, I argue that their suggestions are based on an essentialist notion of boys that stands in stark contrast to the narratives of black queer youth that imply the question that Martino and Pallotta-Chiarolli (2005) ask, ‘So what’s a boy?’

The suggestions for inclusion offered in Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker’s (2000) Raising Cain are different from the other three popular trade books, perhaps because they make the case that ‘emotional literacy’ as opposed to recess or competitive teaching formats is the most valuable gift we can give boys. They argue that:

What boys need first and foremost is to be seen through a different lens than tradition prescribes. Individually, and as a culture, we must discard the distorted view of boys that ignores or denies their capacity for feeling, the view that colors even boys’ perceptions of themselves as above or outside a life of emotions. (Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker 2000, 240)
I appreciate that Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker ask the reader to see boys ‘through a different lens than tradition prescribes’ which could imply viewing boys in non-essentialist ways that recognise their diverse social identities. Despite this gesture, however, Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker remain essentialist in their view of boys. Similar to the other authors discussed in this article, they suggest that teachers ‘recognize and accept the high activity level of boys and give them safe places to express it’ (245). And, ‘Talk to boys in their language – in a way that honors their pride and their masculinity. Be direct with them; use them as consultants and problem solvers’ (245). These suggestions imply that boys have a particular language that is all their own, and that boys necessarily have a high activity level that demands space for expression. But what about girls? From Kindlon, Thompson, and Barker’s perspective one can assume they too have their own language, but prefer to sit inside and talk rather than go outside. No mention is made of gender norms that act to cloud our perceptions of what constitutes a ‘boy’ or a ‘girl’ (Renold 2005).

When I interviewed black queer youth I did not ask them how schools could be more inclusive of boys because that was not the focus of my research. I did ask them, however, about their participation in certain extracurricular activities. Their narratives of these experiences serve as an alternative lens through which to conceptualise school inclusion. For example, David, describing why he stayed away from Project 10, suggests he did not find the predominantly white female group inclusive because his social identity differed from theirs:

D: Project 10, but they’re all pretty close and they all know each other. And friends of theirs who may or may not be straight-identified may drop in and just hang out with them. But usually it’s not related to queer support. It’s usually just a social place where I guess they can talk about their girlfriends or whatever. But even then the few times that I went they were talking about upcoming events as far as queer activism or a ski trip, planning outings and planning a ski trip or something, I think I went two consecutive weeks and then I stopped going because it wasn’t doing anything for me. There’s nothing there for me. Right now it’s just tea-time for a few lesbians and their friends.

Jamal explained that he stayed away from Project 10 meetings because he feared being seen by his black peers:

J: 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. I’m sure everyone was welcome, but I mean actually I don’t know who went.

Kevin tells the most heartbreaking story related to inclusion. He enjoyed participating in the school’s ADP, but never felt the teacher accepted him or his gender non-conforming behaviour:

K: I would say like, all the people who should know me the best, it should be (the teacher). But then I don’t think she knows me very well. Where’s the love? I don’t think anybody really knows me, none of the teachers.

Although the above narratives describe the challenges of participating in various extracurricular programmes, they all seem to reflect the impossibility of fostering an inclusive environment based on any essentialist notion of identity. David’s narrative, for example, suggests he felt excluded from Project 10 because the activities the group
was planning did not take into account that some queer youth might not like skiing or enjoy participating in the same forms of activism. Jamal’s narrative suggests that he feared going to Project 10 because the door to room was under surveillance by his peers who policed the ‘boundaries of blackness’ at the school (Cohen 1999). Kevin’s narrative suggests that his ongoing gender non-conforming behaviour created a rift between him and the teacher when he refused to adhere to the gender norms of the class. What seems obvious from an intersectional perspective is that schools can be more inclusive of boys by recognising and nurturing the race, class, gender and sexuality differences among them.

Conclusion: making space for diverse masculinities

Narratives of black queer youth suggest that questions of ‘Which boys are in crisis?’, ‘How do secondary schools contribute to the crisis?’ and ‘What can secondary schools do to be more inclusive of boys?’ need to be approached from a critical perspective that rejects essentialist notions of boys and embraces the sociocultural differences among them. I use the term ‘making space for diverse masculinities’ to describe this work. Is it possible for boys’ education to be inclusive in ways that makes space for diverse masculinities? I think so, but it requires educators to learn more about why it might be important to challenge the belief that boys are biologically hardwired for certain behaviours across all other forms of social and cultural difference. Approaching inclusive education from an essentialist standpoint leads educators to overlook those boys who fall outside the norm. And contrary to what the authors of popular trade books on the ‘boy crisis’ education would make us believe, the majority of boys in the United States fall outside the norm. We must, as Wayne Martino argues, move away from ‘quick-fix approaches’ to the addressing boys’ underachievement and move towards critical approaches that embrace difference. We can practise this kind of inclusion by:

- learning about, understanding and embracing a politics of difference that validates diverse masculinities (McCready 2008);
- discouraging youth from taking up social identities predicated on physical, sexual, political and economic dominance (Collins 2006);
- encouraging youth to enact the kind of strength that comes from relinquishing the benefits of dominance and focusing on relationships with others who, from the essentialist perspective, might be considered ‘queer’ or outside the norm (Collins 2006); and
- creating safe and comfortable places for gender non-conforming boys in school (McCready 2009).

Overall, it seems if the authors of popular trade books on the ‘boy crisis’ in education were to call for an approach to boys’ inclusion predicated on the notion that all boys’ problems as essentially the same, I imagine black queer youth would respond with a question similar to what Kevin wondered out loud to me: ‘Where’s the love’ for difference?

Notes

1. I define black queer youth as youth of African descent as young as 12 years old and as old as 26 who express their gender and sexuality in non-normative ways or who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex or queer.
Barrie Thorne (1993) uses the term gender non-conforming to describe children who do not adhere to the norms or rules of dress and other cultural practices based on a person’s perceived biological sex. A gender non-conforming boy may choose to present or be perceived as effeminate or not hegemonically masculine.

Many black feminist theorists, such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), believe that people construct knowledge from particular standpoints, where a standpoint is defined as a place from which human beings view the world. A standpoint influences how the people adopting it socially construct the world. An individual’s social group membership affects their standpoints and therefore inequalities between different social groups create differences in their standpoints.

See Note 2.

Notes on contributor

Lance T. McCready, PhD, is an assistant professor of urban education at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. He received his doctorate in social and cultural studies with a Designated Emphasis in Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies from the University of California, Berkeley. Dr McCready teaches School & Society in the inner city-focused cohort of the Secondary Initial Teacher Education programme and teaches graduate course on urban education and gender issues in urban schools. His research and writing focuses on curricular and pedagogical issues in urban education, specifically the ‘troubles’ facing black male students in urban schools and the experiences of queer youth of colour. He is principal investigator of the Culturally Responsive Teaching Practices (CRTP) study of secondary teachers’ understanding and practice of culturally responsive teaching and classroom management and a Lead Researcher on the Black and Latino Male School Intervention Study (BLMSIS) of single-sex schools based at New York University’s Metro Center. A consistent theme throughout all of these projects is using feminist theories of intersectionality to understand and make policy recommendations for marginalised students.

References


