



“I’m Rare in This Space”: A Case Study of the Perceptions and Realities of a Black Gay Male Elementary Music Teacher

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Abstract: As the student population diversifies, teaching initiatives increasingly seek to recruit Teachers of Color, particularly Black men. Yet, less is known about how teachers with intersecting marginalized identities navigate their roles and impact school communities. Through a case study, this study examines how the identity of one Black gay male music teacher shapes his self-perception and interactions within his school. Data were collected through a survey, three semi-structured interviews, and school and teacher artifacts, and analyzed using Grounded Theory methods. Guided by Critical Race Theory and Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model, the findings demonstrate the added value of bringing one’s entire self and authenticity into the classroom and school environment, but require careful foregrounding and backgrounding of identities. Moreover, his presence in the school provides a counterstory and challenges dominant narratives, which he also fosters through culturally relevant pedagogy and inclusive curriculum to normalize diverse identities and broaden representations for students. These representations also positively affect his interactions with school staff, parents, and guardians. However, discussions about race remain superficial, creating tensions as he navigates intersecting identity politics within his schools. Implications suggest that deliberate, attentive listening to the stories and experiential knowledge of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color is essential to supporting diverse educators, fostering truly inclusive school environments, and guiding recruitment and retention efforts.

Keywords: Black male teachers, gay educators, Critical Race Theory, Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Model, case study, counterstory

Citation:

Díaz, E. (2026). “I’m rare in this space”: A case study of the perceptions and realities of a Black gay male elementary music teacher. *Current Issues in Education*, Vol(Issue).

<https://doi.org/10.14507/cie.vol27iss1.2346>

Accepted: 03/02/2026

Introduction

For more than a decade, federal, state, and local policymakers have focused on recruiting more Black male teachers for several reasons, one of which is to create more inclusive representation in schools (Bristol, 2018; Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). Research shows that Black male teachers help diversify the teaching profession (Lewis & Toldson, 2013), serve as role models (Martino & Rezai-Rashti, 2010), and positively impact social, emotional, and academic outcomes (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). Brockenbrough (2013) describes how Black teachers use their shared cultural identity to connect with and motivate Black students, despite navigating the complexities of cultural and identity variations in the modern era. However, Black male teachers remain underrepresented in the teaching profession (NBC News, 2015) due, in part, to lower college graduation rates, fewer education majors, and a tendency to pursue administrative roles rather than classroom teaching (Lewis & Toldson, 2013). At the same time, Black male teachers often face “unfair and unsolicited pressure ... to solve systemic and institutional challenges ingrained in school districts” (Milner, 2016, p. 417). Moreover, when a Black man “decides to teach, his presence in the classroom is laudable, yet the conditions under which he teaches are often troubling and precarious” (Thomas & Warren, 2017, p. 87). Thus, while many people praise the presence of Black male teachers, they often overlook and neglect the school environments in which these teachers work.

As research on Black male teachers has increased, their sexual identity is rarely addressed (Lynn, 2006). “The absence of Black queers from research literature on Black teachers and queer teachers leaves important questions unanswered regarding their participation in the teaching profession” (Brockenbrough, 2011, pp. 1-2). This gap may stem from the historical stigma and societal doubts about LGBTQIA+¹ individuals as teachers (Hart-Brinson, 2016; Kirby & Michaelson, 2015). However, as public attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people have improved (Chonody et al., 2014; Lewis & Gossett, 2008), it is increasingly important to explore how intersecting identities shape teachers’ professional lives. This study contributes to the literature base by investigating how one Black gay male elementary music teacher “negotiate[s] their everyday professional lives” (Neary, 2013, p. 22) through a counterstory that centers his experiential knowledge, a population that remains underrepresented (J. B. Mayo, 2007). Following D. Robinson (2020), examining the “context of public schools enables the opportunity to see promise and obstacles for Black [gay] male teachers” (p. 532). This study employs a case-study approach informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) to examine the following research question: In what ways do the intersecting identities of one Black gay male teacher shape his professional experiences at the microsystem and mesosystem levels of his school environment?

Literature Review

As this study examines multiple intersecting identities of a teacher, I draw on T. L. Robinson’s (1999) definition of identity:

¹ LGBTQIA+ is an abbreviation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual. In this study, it serves as an umbrella term for the broader community, intentionally including and raising awareness of these and other identities across the spectrum (LGBTQIA+ Resource Center, 2020). I use LGBTQIA+ throughout the manuscript for inclusivity while retaining authors’ original terminology when citing prior scholarship.

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[Identity] refers to both visible and invisible domains of the self that influence self-construction. They include, but are not limited to, ethnicity, skin color, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and physical and intellectual ability. In different contexts, various facets of one's identity may dominate in self-definition. (p. 85)

In other words, I see identity as multifaceted and complex, and as influenced by specific contexts (i.e., identities are foregrounded or backgrounded depending on the environment). People with intersecting identities may experience overlapping forms of multiple oppressions (Annamma & Winn, 2019) or multiple jeopardies (e.g., racism, sexism, and classism) (King, 1988). Valdes (1999) further contends that these identities are interconnected and overlap, which includes diverse struggles. While other definitions of identity exist, I find T. L. Robinson's (1999) definition is well-suited for understanding how intersecting identities shape one's sense of self and social positioning within educational settings.

Within educational contexts, identity extends to teachers' identities, foregrounding how educators negotiate their intersecting identities in professional settings. Teacher identity is "what beginning teachers believe about teaching and learning and self-as-teacher—is of vital concern to teacher education; it is the basis for meaning making and decision making. ... Teacher education must begin, then by exploring the teaching self" (Bullough, 1997, p. 21). This highlights the importance of identity in the profession by emphasizing the interconnected personal and professional dimensions of "how to be," "how to act," and "how to understand" and make sense of their work (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009, p. 178). The teacher identity is also important to those they interact with, particularly students, as it influences students' academic engagement, social and emotional development, perceptions of care, and the formation of trusting relationships (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019; D. Robinson, 2020). While lived experiences do not solely determine educational impact, those shaped by multiple marginalizations meaningfully shape how teachers interpret their experiences, create positive learning environments, and navigate power dynamics in schools. Therefore, "it is important to pay attention to the personal part of teachers' professional identity" (Beijaard et al., 2004, p. 109), especially as experiences are often shaped by "racial, ethnic, and cultural heritage," among other identities and qualities (Milner, 2007). In the next section, I provide a brief historical overview of LGBTQIA+ teachers and their experiences in education, followed by a review of Black male teachers' experiences.

Brief Historical Overview of LGBTQIA+ Teachers in Education

Throughout U.S. history, LGBTQIA+ people have faced discrimination (Machado, 2014), including being targeted and portrayed as predators because of their sex, sexual orientation, and/or transgender identities (Díaz, 2022). In education, LGBTQIA+ teachers have faced stereotypes that falsely associate homosexuality with pedophilia (Blackburn & Parker, 2022). They are frequently depicted as a "sickness, crime, and a source of national subversion" (Fejes, 2016, p. 17) and as a result of these portrayals, rhetoric surrounding LGBTQIA+ identities fueled a moral panic, defined as a perceived threat to values sacred or fundamental to a given society (Thompson, 1998), which questioned whether LGBTQIA+ teachers were suitable to work with children (Kirby & Michaelson, 2015).

These unfounded fears and concerns prompted state governments to adopt protectionist stances through legislation (Díaz, 2022; Harbeck, 1992). For example, in 1978, Proposition 6, proposed by Senator John V. Briggs, "would have made homosexuals ineligible for employment

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in the [California's] public school system" (Fetner, 2001, p. 415). Similar laws were introduced and passed in other states, including Oregon, Minnesota, and Kansas (Fejes, 2016). More recently, Florida passed Senate Bill 1834, which prohibits "a school district from encouraging classroom discussion about sexual orientation or gender identity in primary grade levels or in a specified manner" (Parental Rights in Education, 2022, p. 1). While this paper does not capture the full scope of anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, in 2025, "more than 75 anti-LGBTQ+ bills have been signed into law ... more than doubling last year's number, which was previously the worst year on record" (Human Rights Campaign, n.d., para. 2). Essentially, legislation has been strategically used to construct and sustain school environments that marginalize, exclude, and in some cases, are actively hostile toward LGBTQIA+ identities (Barrett & Bound, 2015).

Although LGBTQIA+ teachers have been targets of these attacks throughout history, such conditions did not prevent them from teaching (Blackburn & Parker, 2022). However, it did require them to make "strategic, careful, and at times uncomfortable decisions about fully disclosing their identity" (Duarte, 2020, p. 26). Consequently, these historical and legislative conditions have shaped the experiences of LGBTQIA+ teachers, highlighting the need for a close examination of their lived experiences (Díaz, 2022).

Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Teachers

Scholarship has expanded to place a greater focus on LGBTQIA+ educators and has highlighted the multifaceted negotiations around visibility, identity, and belonging within school environments, which are often structured by heterosexism (C. Mayo, 2010). For instance, Gray (2013) analyzed the complex nature of "coming out" for 20 LGB teachers, revealing a careful negotiation between private and professional worlds. Furthermore, three main strategies for coming out were identified: not coming out or discussing private life at all at school, coming out only to colleagues, and coming out to students and colleagues. While teachers who came out in varying degrees often report "greater job satisfaction and smoother interconnections between their private and professional selves," they still face the obstacle of "challeng[ing] heteronormativity and homophobia within their school" (Gray, 2013, p. 712).

Additionally, Endo et al. (2010) surveyed six lesbian and gay secondary teachers and found that all teachers did not disclose their sexual identity due to fears of response from students, parents, and the community, but still felt a "duty to promote equity and social justice in the school setting" (p. 1029). Similarly, J. B. Mayo (2008) explored the complex relationships between seven male gay teachers and their heterosexual colleagues and students. The findings revealed that teachers maintained "guarded, cordial relationships with colleagues" that normalized privacy and discretion at school, often refusing to socialize due to discomfort (J. B. Mayo, 2008, p. 7). Furthermore, the study found that interactions between LGBTQIA+ teachers and LGBTQIA+ students consisted of "pulling students aside, giving students advice, watching over perceived gay students with caring eyes" (J. B. Mayo, 2008, p. 6).

More recent studies echo these findings. In a case study of two gay cisgender music teachers, Palkki (2015) showed how they navigated coming out at work through a closet continuum that included reconciling their identities before entering teaching, withholding and gradually disclosing their identities while teaching, and ultimately bringing their whole selves to the school (Palkki, 2015). Moreover, Fahie (2017) examined the lived experiences of 23 lesbian, gay, and bisexual teachers in Irish Roman Catholic primary schools. Every teacher expressed anxious feelings and tension between their professional responsibilities in teaching religion and

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their diverse views on religion overall (Fahie, 2017). Furthermore, Thomas-Durrell's study (2020) examined the experiences and philosophical beliefs of two gay music educators in the U.S. Bible Belt. Four themes emerged from the study: (1) Describing the Bible Belt (e.g., pride in promoting Christian teachings); (2) Familial influences on coming out (e.g., avoiding discussions about sexuality); (3) Teacher considerations for being out (e.g., weighing risks of disclosure); and (4) Philosophical beliefs (e.g., sexuality does not shape instruction). Although research may frame "coming out" as a marker of authenticity, there is caution against treating disclosure as attainable or desirable, as decisions for disclosing are shaped by factors such as identities, social and physical geography, religions, climates, and legislation (Duarte, 2020; Endo et al., 2010; Fahie, 2017; Palkki, 2015).

Black Male Teachers

Research has increasingly examined the experiences of Black teachers and teachers of color, as well as their complex and varied experiences within the profession (Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019). For instance, Bristol (2018) surveyed the school-based experiences of 86 Black Male Teachers across the Boston Public Schools (BPS). The findings showed that *Loners*, teachers without colleagues of the same gender or racial/ethnic identity, were more likely to be certified through alternative certification programs and teach in unfamiliar districts, while *Groupers*, Black male teachers with multiple Black male colleagues, were more often in failing schools (Bristol, 2018). Moreover, when comparing the two groups, Groupers were more likely to stay in their schools. Still, as a whole, Black male teachers may leave at higher rates, may face hostility, and have fewer opportunities to influence policies as compared to white teachers (Bristol, 2018). Furthermore, through a narrative study, Tafari (2013) identified four major themes encapsulating the experiences of Black male teachers: (1) Shifting mindset from self-focus to "be[ing] of service" (p. 97); (2) Inspiration from Black women; (3) The role of communal support; and (4) Commitment to fight for students.

Similarly, D. Robinson (2020) researched the experiences of 10 Black male teachers, revealing three themes for entering and staying in the teaching profession: (1) quality connections, (2) personalized insights informed by lived experiences, and (3) challenging perceptions and stereotypes. This study also revealed how Black male teachers inspire Black students to continue a lineage of teaching while creating protective and caring spaces in school settings hostile to marginalized identities (D. Robinson, 2020). Furthermore, Brockenbrough (2013) interviewed 11 Black male teachers in New York middle and high schools regarding their identity development and professional experiences. Two major themes emerged: (1) intraracial identity politics participants' Black and Black male identities under scrutiny, including class, educational status, and regional background; and (2) a sense of disconnection that stemmed from being outside the local community, which influenced their teaching experiences (Brockenbrough, 2013). This study demonstrates the need for fuller portraits and stories of Black teachers by reexamining the traditional expectations of Black educators (Brockenbrough, 2013) alongside other intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989) to better prepare and support them.

Collectively, these studies show the role of identities in shaping teachers' experiences, while also demonstrating how exclusionary legislation, harmful stereotypes, instructional contexts, and school conditions shape the experiences of LGBTQIA+ and Black teachers. However, further research is needed to understand how intersecting identities shape experiences and interactions in schools. Hayes (2014a) contributes to this research area by investigating

teachers of color and sexual identities to understand how their intersecting identities (e.g., race and sexuality) impact their teaching. Building on this work, I align my study with scholars who examine educators' experiences by considering intersecting identities, emphasizing the importance of examining how race, ethnicity, religion, and (dis)ability shape teachers' experiences in schools (Annamma & Winn, 2019).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Model

Urie Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model provides a new perspective on human development, emphasizing that "what matters for behavior and development is the environment as it is perceived rather than as it may exist in 'objective' reality" (p. 4). In other words, adopting this perspective means understanding the multiple, interrelated factors that affect and interact with a person. Bronfenbrenner (1979) describes four systems of interactions, which are defined below (Table 1).

Table 1
Definitions of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems

Ecological System	Definition
1. Microsystem	"... is a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (e.g., home, classroom; p. 22).
2. Mesosystem	"... comprises the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates" (e.g., for an adult, among family, work, and social life; p. 25)
3. Exosystem	"... refers to one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person" (e.g., parents' workplace; school attended by siblings; p. 25).
4. Macrosystem	"... refers to consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies" (p. 26).

These four system levels structure the ecological environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). While this framework has been applied to child development and youth (Espelage, 2014), its use in exploring teacher experiences remains relatively limited. In this study, I used this model to analyze how a teacher's intersecting identities are shaped and negotiated across multiple ecological contexts within the school environment.

Critical Race Theory

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Drawing on CRT, which originated in Black legal studies (Crenshaw, 1989; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001), I seek to examine the relationships among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). CRT scholars have named tenets of CRT, which include:

- (1) *Centrality and intersectionality of race and racism*. CRT starts with the premise that race and racism should be central in research and acknowledges the intersection of race with other forms of subordination, such as gender and class discrimination (Crenshaw, 1989).
- (2) *Challenge to dominant ideology*. CRT seeks to “challenge the traditional claims of the legal system to objectivity, meritocracy, color-blindness, race neutrality, and equal opportunity” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 6).
- (3) *Commitment to social justice*. CRT has a motivation to “social justice and the elimination of racism” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 7).
- (4) *Centrality of experiential knowledge*. CRT recognizes the experiential knowledge of People of Color as “legitimate, appropriate, and effective basis for analyzing the legal system and racial subordination” (Calmore, 1992, p. 2161). This aligns with Yosso’s (2005) concept of cultural wealth, which highlights the “accumulated assets and resources in the histories and lives of Communities of Color” (p. 77).
- (5) *Interdisciplinary perspective*. CRT uses various interdisciplinary approaches and epistemologies to historical and contemporary contexts (Solorzano, 1997).

Moreover, I apply QueerCrit, an extension of CRT, to understand the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexuality. QueerCrit is used to “recognize that binary categories of identity that we often treat as stable—such as man, woman, Black, White ... are actually pliable, messy, and full of border crossers” (Fotopoulou, 2012, p. 160), and allows space for alternate and fluid identities (Díaz, 2022). As Butler (1990) argues, identities (e.g., gender) are deeply interwoven with political and cultural contexts and cannot be understood in isolation. Thus, it is important to examine how different marginalized groups experience overlapping forms of subordination and struggle in interconnected ways (Valdes, 1999).

I apply Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model and CRT to explore a teacher’s experiences across multiple and layered factors and systems (Annamma & Winn, 2019). Focusing on the microsystem and mesosystem provides a more in-depth understanding of the immediate factors shaping a Black gay male teacher’s experiences and interactions. Furthermore, by incorporating a critical framework, specifically the tenet of counterstory and its experiential knowledge, CRT exposes how heteronormativities manifest in academic work contexts (Ozturk & Rumens, 2014), helping to understand heteronormative structures in public schools. Counterstory is defined as stories or narratives from People of Color “aimed at challenging one of the inscribed and blithely repeated accounts by which majoritarians make sense of their world” (Delgado, 1993, p. 671). Collectively, these frameworks help us understand the interconnected yet distinct struggles of minoritized people and are appropriate for this study to make sense of the experiences of a Black gay teacher. Through this counterstory, I aim to illuminate the unique lived experiences of People of Color (Hayes, 2014b) while contributing to scholarly research by providing a space to amplify voices and experiences related to intersecting and multiple marginalized identities, defined as “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual orientation and how their combination plays out in various settings” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 58).

Methodology

This study employs a case study approach (Yin, 2003) to examine the experiences of a Black gay male teacher within his school, highlighting the phenomenon of intersectionality. Drawing on counterstorytelling within CRT, this study centers on his experiential knowledge to challenge narratives that tend to overlook the experiences of educators with intersecting identities. As Delgado Bernal (2002) notes, counterstories also serve as a pedagogical tool, encouraging deliberate and attentive listening to the experiences of marginalized individuals. A case study is suitable for answering “how” and “why” questions “because such questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time, rather than mere frequencies or incidence” (Yin, 2003, p. 6). Furthermore, it aligns with the study’s goals by using multiple data sources and data collection methods (Yin, 2003).

Participant

Eric Smith (pseudonym) self-identifies as a Black male who describes his sexuality as same-gender-loving. Although he may occasionally use the terms *gay* or *queer*, he does not feel these labels represent his identities because they are rooted in whiteness and carry stigmas of perversion. Eric also identifies as a spiritual individual (i.e., believes in a higher power, but is not religious) who is fully out, meaning he does not hide his sexual orientation or identity. He earned two Bachelor of Science degrees in Sales Marketing and Audio Production from a Historically Black College and University (HBCU). Eric began his teaching career as a substitute teacher in 2017, transitioning to a full-time K-2 grade music teacher (2019-2022). At the time of this study, he had five years of teaching experience.

Setting

Eric worked in a public charter school located in Southern California, referred to as Charlie Wilson Charter School (CWCS; pseudonym) in this study. CWCS is part of a charter network that operates five campuses, including three in California. The school employs approximately 16 lead teachers. Of these, 10 identify as white and female, three as Asian women, one as a Latina, and two as Black—one female and one male. Moreover, serving students from kindergarten through 5th-grade (K-5), CWCS’s student demographics mirror those of the surrounding community. Table 2 presents the student enrollment for the 2020-2021 school year.

Table 2
Student Enrollment

Student Group	Category	Total Enrollment
Total Number of Students		465
Gender	Female	49.20%
	Male	50.80%
Race/Ethnicity	Asian	17.40%
	Black or African American	3.70%
	Filipino	1.10%
	Hispanic or Latino	31.40%

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Student Group	Category	Total Enrollment
Other Student Characteristics	Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	0.20%
	Two or More Races	5.40%
	White	40.60%
	English Learners	16.10%
	Homeless	0.40%
	Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	43.20%
	Students with Disabilities	11.20%

The timing of this study is important because it occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools in California shifted to online instruction. This change affected student attendance and disrupted established classroom routines and procedures. More importantly, these conditions influenced interactions between teachers, students, and parents. Thus, the broader educational climate of 2020-2021 directly informs the study's findings.

Data Sources

This study employed data triangulation, drawing from multiple sources of evidence about the same phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Table 3 outlines all the data sources used in this study.

Table 3
Data Sources

Data Source	Description	Quantity
Survey	The survey included 37 closed-ended items and three open-ended questions on demographics, school policies, interactions, and workplace experiences and perceptions.	1 Survey
Interviews	Audio of semi-structured interviews.	3 Interviews
Teacher and School Artifacts	Artifacts shared by the participant related to the teacher and school resources. The charter school documents are publicly available and are cited in the text, but are not included to preserve the anonymity of the research site.	5 Lesson Plans 1 Employee Handbook 1 Charter Renewal Application

During each interview, I took detailed notes, and afterward, I wrote analytic memos to reflect on the interview, document observations about the participant, and develop follow-up questions (Patton, 2015).

Data Analysis

Taking an inductive approach, I used *Grounded Theory* methods (Charmaz, 2014) to analyze the data. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in an iterative cycle, with emerging concepts continuously refined throughout the process (Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Interviews were transcribed using *Transcribe by Wreally* and coded in *Atlas.ti 9.0.18 for Mac* to develop into three different levels of concepts that build on one another

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(Charmaz, 2014), encapsulating the experiences of a Black gay teacher in alignment with the theoretical framework.

The analysis began with open coding of the interviews, resulting in 137 codes, including in vivo codes to capture Eric's voice. These codes were sharpened into 29 axial codes. Next, the axial codes were constructed into two thematic categories grounded in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems, specifically the microsystem, and mesosystem, to present a Black gay male teacher's experience negotiating intersecting identities (Crenshaw, 1989): (1) Personal views of intersecting identities (Microsystem); and (2) Interactions with colleagues, parents, and students (Mesosystem). Moreover, to increase the validity, supplemental materials were gathered and analyzed, including a survey, and teacher and school artifacts. Regular meetings with a peer were conducted to mitigate confirmation bias, along with two member checks with the participant to ensure an accurate and authentic representation of his experiences.

Researcher Positionality

This research holds personal significance, as it stems from my own experiences as a Xicano gay teacher. During my graduate coursework, I began exploring the experiences of Black and Brown gay male teachers. I continued this inquiry in my dissertation, which focused on LGBTQIA+ teachers in California and Florida, two states where I taught. After conducting a linguistic examination of anti-LGBTIA+ texts and surveying 150 teachers, I wanted to explore the lived experiences of Black and Brown LGBTQIA+ teachers more deeply. However, only one participant responded to join the study, a close friend of mine, who ultimately became the sole participant. This pre-existing relationship facilitated trust and helped with rapport throughout the research process, allowing me to "capture vivid details" while helping the participant feel at ease (Charmaz, 2014, p. 41). I believe this connection also created a space for more open and honest dialogue, even when discussing sensitive topics.

At the same time, I acknowledge that my subjectivities, shaped by personal identities, backgrounds, and research experience, inevitably influence this study. According to Corbin and Strauss (2015), qualitative researchers bring their ideologies, biases, knowledge, and assumptions to the research process. In response, I engaged in reflective practices to monitor and check my biases, including keeping a research journal to document my feelings, thought processes, and impressions throughout the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Additionally, I wrote analytic memos to capture my thinking as I went through the data, coding, and post-interview debriefs (Patton, 2015). These practices ensured that I did not gloss over points that seemed obvious or uncomfortable (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

Findings

I organized findings across ecological levels, offering insights into the experiences of a Black gay male teacher within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) microsystem and mesosystem. I constructed two themes: (1) "I'm rare in this space": Personal views of intersecting identities (Microsystem); and (2) "Be[ing] myself...shines through": Interactions with colleagues, parents, and students (Mesosystem). These themes are grounded in Eric's own words, with direct quotes to highlight and honor his voice and lived experiences.

"I'm Rare in This Space": Personal Views of Intersecting Identities (Microsystem)

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Within the microsystem, various patterns of activities and roles are experienced by the developing person in a setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), in this study, a teacher in a school context. As an elementary school teacher, Eric reported on the survey feeling comfortable being himself and expressed no pressure to hide his gender, sexuality, or any other form of identification at his school. However, Eric noted feeling that certain identities take precedence over others, foregrounding some while backgrounding others.

For instance, his racial and gender identities as a Black male are especially prevalent, making him “stand out.” He reflected, “I’m a Black man, and I’m also not doing the stereotypical shit that they, that the media portrays a Black man to be.” In this way, Eric sees himself as a positive influence and defies the way the media has often framed Black men. He further elaborates, “... being a Black gay man in a school setting, and not only being a Black gay man. But being the only Black man, it’s like, whoa, like, okay ... I’m rare in this space.” At Eric’s school, his presence as the only Black male teacher makes him unique. As a result, his racial and gender identities come to the forefront, positioning him as what he describes as a “healthy representation.” In his description, Eric demonstrates an awareness that his presence as a Black male teacher matters because it offers an alternative or counterstory to the stereotypical portrayals of Black men that people, including students, encounter beyond the school walls.

While Eric is open about his sexual orientation, he expressed being conflicted about the use of certain identity labels. For example, he goes “back and forth with” the term gay because “gay sounds like ... white to me ... It just sounds kind of white and perverted. Like that’s what I associate gay, the word gay with.” For Eric, terms like gay may carry racial undertones that discourage and exclude individuals from self-identifying while invoking historically stigmatized understandings of gay teachers in schools. Similarly, he associates the term queer more with “someone who is non-binary,” which is why he rarely uses it. Both gay and queer have shifting understandings and meanings shaped by the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality.

Nevertheless, Eric does use these terms occasionally as he tries to change perceptions of people who are often not represented in education. For example, when asked whether his intersecting identities are welcomed at his school, he responded:

I feel like I really belong in my school ... because I don’t know if there is somebody that’s pushing like just thought and conversation at my school. So, for me to be in that space and just to be [a] representation for [the] underrepresented, you know? Like for the queer students, for the Black students, for the, the male students that don’t see a male...that often...because all the teachers are white females, you know? To just be some type of representation for somebody and like a decent representation, you know? I mean, like I feel like it’s important for me to be in that space.

As the only Black gay male teacher at his school, Eric feels a strong sense of responsibility to represent his intersecting identities in a positive light and serve as a counterstory, especially for his students. He tends to foreground his racial and gender identities, which are more apparent, while other aspects, such as sexuality and (dis)abilities, may be present but remain less visible.

Though Eric navigates the complexities of his identities within the school setting, his passion for working with music and children has kept him at CWCS. This passion was ignited by the wife of one of his friends, who suggested he “become a substitute [teacher].” Eric credits her influence on him to pursue teaching as a career, stating, “She introduced me to a bunch of other teachers who told me about the job and how much they enjoyed it, so I just ended up getting into it.” However, his decision was also financially motivated. Eric shared,

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I was doing music freelance, and the money wasn't consistent, so the substitute teaching has supplemented my income, but I really, once I got into it, I really enjoyed working with kids, and yeah, that, that long-term position just made sense [because] it provided some, some comfort and safety financially.

Eric's story illustrates how financial stability can play an important role in career decisions. In his case, the security of a steady income, combined with his growing passion for teaching, led him to decide to become a teacher.

The examples above demonstrate that Eric is comfortable with his identities and recognizes the value each brings. As shared in his interview, "Bringing myself in the classroom...[helps] kids be open to what I have to teach." Eric's personal views of his identities also reveal the complexity of identity, especially when navigating definitions and labels that do not always align with his lived experiences. Nevertheless, by embracing his authentic self, Eric stands out in his school environment, where he is determined to challenge stereotypes and reshape perceptions of Black gay male teachers through his counterstory. By bringing this authenticity into the classroom, Eric believes students will be more open to engaging and learning because he has built trust and meaningful connections. Ultimately, his decision to pursue a long-term position as a music teacher was shaped by his circumstances, beliefs, and the encouragement he received.

"Be[ing] myself...shines through": Interactions with Colleagues, Parents, and Students (Mesosystem)

The mesosystem includes the "interrelations among two or more settings in which a person actively participates" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). I divide this theme into three parts that align with the survey topics: interactions with colleagues, parents/guardians, and students, reflecting Eric's interactions across classroom and school settings in which he actively participates. In this theme, Eric describes his interactions as overall positive, in large part because he brings his "full self in[to] the space," fostering greater authenticity and stronger relationships. These interactions build trust and demonstrate consistency across contexts and relationships, contributing to a sense of belonging rather than alienation.

Interactions With Colleagues

In the survey, Eric reported "being fully out" to colleagues. Because coming out is a continuous and context-dependent process, an individual's decision to disclose their sexuality may vary. For Eric, being out at CWCS has positively influenced his interactions with colleagues. Specifically, he feels "very safe" having conversations regarding LGBTQIA+ topics and described his school as a "very progressive" place that "feel[s] like a community." The CWCS employee handbook outlines the organization's vision for diversity, equity, and inclusion by fostering a "sense of belonging," supporting leadership development for all stakeholders, and emphasizing ongoing education and professional learning. However, despite articulated efforts and goals, Eric reported that the school has yet to fully translate its intentions into meaningful actions.

Nevertheless, the school has taken some steps toward inclusivity. In collaboration with his colleagues, Eric helped organize "a virtual Pride Parade and assembly" during the COVID-19 school closures, where LGBTQIA+ staff members were honored. He recalled that school

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administrators began making a more intentional effort to celebrate heritage months as of the 2020-2021 school year. This event, planned by both LGBTQIA+ staff and allies, demonstrated how CWCS is creating space to recognize and normalize diverse sexual identities among staff, while modeling inclusion for students. These efforts align with CWCS's mission to prepare students "to thrive in the pluralistic society they will soon join ... [and] to form authentic friendships with individuals of other races, cultures, and backgrounds." For Eric, these initiatives allow "people [to] be seen" and represented, serving as a counterstory that challenges dominant narratives and affirms the experiences and identities of marginalized groups, which are key steps toward greater understanding and acceptance.

Moreover, Eric regularly meets with colleagues in an LGBT affinity group, reflecting the school's sexually diverse staff, where they discuss topics such as "what [their] professional and personal things are" and "empower[ing] each other as LGBTQIA+ educators." However, Eric expressed discomfort with some interactions and jokes within the LGBT affinity group. He explained, "I don't want to like make fun of my sexuality like that's not what I came here for, you know? ... [I] just want to be myself." In these moments, Eric feels that other affinity members use humor to fit in rather than to establish meaningful and authentic relationships.

Furthermore, Eric noted that his experience interacting with colleagues around race is less inclusive than around sexuality. He shared:

... being Black very much so stands out, and it's a very like uncomfortable conversation, not for me, but I feel like more so for my co-workers. They tiptoe around race ... cause when we do these diversity, equity, and inclusion, like, it's easy for everybody to include women and disabilities and ... sexuality, but race is kind of those ones, of those ones where we just skip over it and not necessarily skip over, but just kind of tiptoe around it.

This example highlights how discussions about race remain "the biggest touchy subject" among Eric's predominantly white colleagues. While the school might be a safe place for all his intersecting identities, and colleagues generally support diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives, Eric believes there is a lack of awareness of prejudice and implicit bias. For instance, CWCS's (2019) professional development offerings include:

Presentation of the theoretical underpinnings of our philosophy and curricular approaches; Activities to assist teachers in internalizing the theories; Introduction to curricular tools; Opportunities to plan to use the curricular tools, with support; Introduction to assessment tools; and Training in analyzing assessment data and determining the implications for instruction. (p. 82)

The employee handbook emphasizes engaging staff in professional development "to create a common vocabulary and a shared understanding of what diversity, equity, and inclusion mean" (p. 4). However, Eric feels these efforts fall short, noting that it was only as recent as 2020 that the school began creating space for training on gender issues and sexual diversity.

Due to some feelings of alienation and difficulty connecting with his colleagues about his "Blackness," Eric has joined an affinity group outside his school to connect with other Black teachers. He expressed, "I'm in another one [affinity group] across campuses that's all Black people...[but] there are also LGBT staff members in the Black one." Eric acknowledges the multiple "intersectionalities that fall within these spaces," but noted that affinity groups at his own school are "so small," especially regarding his racial identity, reflective of the low percentage of Black students (3.70%) at CWCS. Although the interactions differ between his racial and sexual identities with his colleagues, Eric believes that "being gay probably makes me

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a little safer as a Black man” and allows for more positive interactions with colleagues within the school environment:

I think that if I was a straight Black man, there would be some, some fear and some inferior... But I think because I'm gay, it's like, you know, I'm softer, you know? So, I'm a little, a little easier to deal with than like a heterosexual Black man.

In this reflection, Eric suggests that his sexuality allows him to be more accepted in the school environment and improves his interactions, while also drawing attention to how intersecting identities, specifically his Blackness, maleness, and queerness, shape the opportunities and challenges he faces in educational settings.

Overall, Eric's intersecting identities positively shape his interactions with colleagues. He can navigate his identities and show up as his authentic self, all while seeking out spaces that acknowledge intersectionality. Although Eric feels safe at his school, particularly because his sexual identity makes him more approachable, the lack of racial diversity makes his interactions with others who do not share the same racial identity superficial. Eric is “very comfortable sharing” his racial identity, yet feels that conversations with colleagues about race and racism are often treated as taboo. This hesitancy creates a barrier that limits meaningful interaction with them.

Interactions With Parents/Guardians

When interacting with parents and guardians, Eric generally has positive interactions and feels comfortable discussing a variety of issues, including LGBTQIA+ topics. In the survey responses, he indicated that parents and guardians were unaware of his sexuality until he chose to “come out” to everyone at the Pride Month assembly. At first, Eric had reservations about disclosing his sexual orientation to parents and guardians:

... my fears before were, I think, just being associated with being a pedophile ... So, often I hear people refer to pedophiles as being gay, and to me, that's two totally separate things, you know? But because, okay, if I come out as a gay man now, are people going to associate me as a pedophile? Are people gonna think I'm trying to touch kids now because I like men?

This reluctance and fear of being labeled a pedophile reflects the harmful stereotypes historically attached to LGBTQIA+ people, especially in school settings. However, these concerns have not stopped Eric from building strong relationships with his students' parents and guardians, as he has drawn on his racial and gender identities to establish trust and meaningful connections. Although sexual identity or LGBTQIA+ topics rarely come up in the classroom, Eric mentioned he feels comfortable talking about them with other adults when necessary. He views his identities as an asset:

I think my [sexual] identity does affect me positively in the sense that it makes me embrace being myself. So, it's like this, this part of me, like all these parts of me, make up me, and if I'm able to carry those in every space that I'm in, like, I feel comfortable and confident enough to be myself, and I think that shines through in all of these interactions.

Here, Eric embraces the fluidity of his identities, which shine through in his interactions, as he foregrounds and backgrounds them to foster interpersonal relationships while staying authentic to himself.

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Parents and guardians also connected with Eric through the lessons he taught, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when instruction shifted to Zoom. With virtual learning often taking place in the students' homes, parents became part of the classroom experience. As a result, Eric's interactions with parents changed for the better, with increased access, and remained extremely positive. He shared:

[During] virtual lessons, like parents would like attend my class because they would just want to know, like who we were going to learn about today ... It would be so cool because we would talk about like Trombone Shorty, Bob Marley, cause you know, all these people have children's books as well ... And then there may be a parent that's like, "Oh, we saw Trombone Shorty at the Hollywood Bowl," and then the kids will share that with the class. And ... you're connecting it with your parents. You're learning about the Hollywood Bowl.

Through these virtual lessons, Eric created opportunities for shared learning and engagement, fostering parents' investment in the content he presented. Figure 1 shows an example of a PowerPoint slide that caught many parents' attention.

Figure 1

Trombone Shorty PowerPoint Example



The slide above demonstrates how Eric foregrounds his identity as a Black male in his teaching by highlighting Black musicians. Furthermore, parents' involvement in virtual instruction also reveals a slight tension between their engagement and the potential for curriculum surveillance. The proximity of home-based learning during the pandemic created new opportunities for meso-level interconnections. Moreover, Eric was able to establish meaningful relationships with parents by strategically emphasizing different aspects of his identity. In doing so, he creates a

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counterstory that challenges assumptions and stereotypes about who Black gay male teachers are, fostering greater acceptance of racially and sexually minoritized individuals.

Parents also gave Eric positive feedback regarding the impact of his teaching. For instance, one parent shared, “her daughter is always making up songs now, like when she’s at home.” These reflections suggest Eric’s intersecting identities aided his instructional practice, especially as he foregrounded his racial and gender identities to connect with parents. His ability to shift and adapt how he presents himself across home and school settings demonstrates how educators can strategically draw on different facets of their identity to build trust and community.

Interactions With Students

Eric has had positive interactions with students throughout this teaching experience and remains committed to teaching because of his genuine love for working with kids. However, for most of his teaching career, he chose not to disclose his sexuality to his students. As discussed earlier, his biggest fear was being labeled a pedophile and “having to defend” himself against faceless accusations simply because he is a gay teacher. This concern led him to avoid “coming out” in the classroom. Although Eric did not view his sexuality as information his students needed to know, this required a form of identity management. He explained,

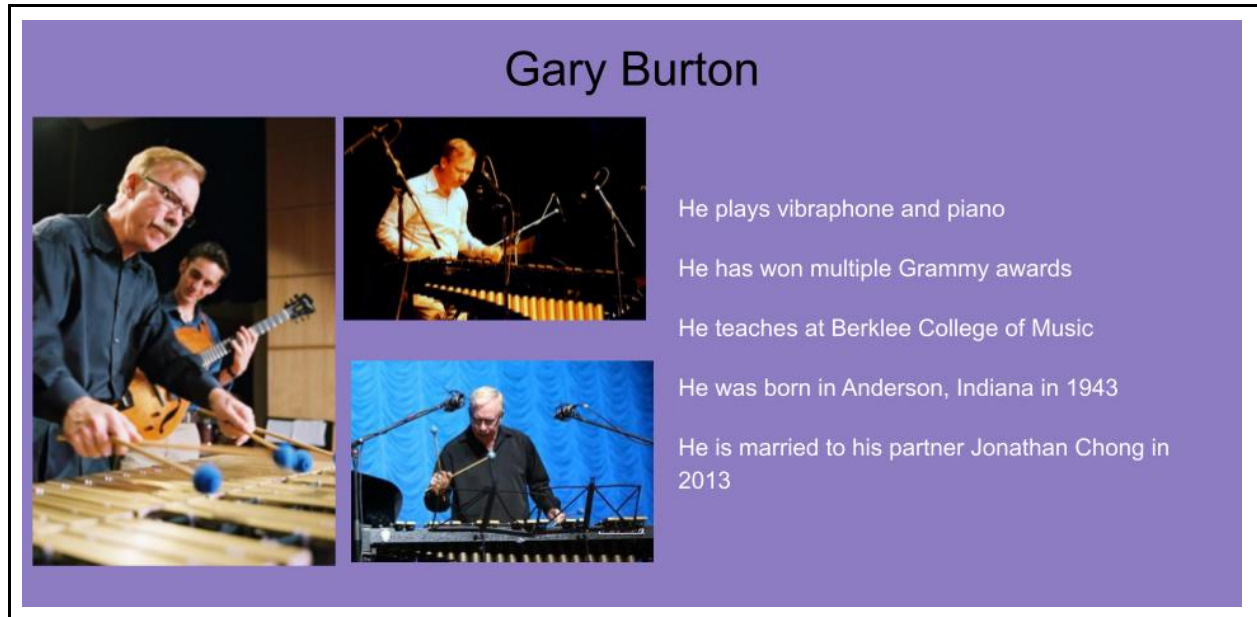
[I] didn’t feel like it was important...I wasn’t there to teach them [about] sexuality. I was there to teach them music...So, it just, it just didn’t feel of value to me to tell my students, like, “By the way, I’m gay.”

While Eric framed his choice as a professional boundary, navigating which aspects of his identities to conceal and reveal creates a tension between safety and authenticity. This process involved emotional labor, as he carefully decided how to present certain identities to avoid suspicion or scrutiny. While this did not deter his passion for teaching, the need to background or suppress parts of his identity constrained how fully he could inhabit the classroom, shaping his interactions with students and his experiences as a teacher. Instead of foregrounding every identity, Eric emphasized bringing his “full self” into every space, especially in the classroom, in ways that felt safe and professionally appropriate, highlighting the complex negotiations LGBTQIA+ teachers make for their own well-being and their students.

Moreover, Eric mentioned focusing on teaching music to his students rather than explicitly addressing LGBTQIA+ topics or sexuality. Instead, he draws attention to the diverse identities of various musicians, helping students understand individuals beyond their sexual orientation. Eric “talk[s] to them about different musicians that were of the [LGBTQIA+] community ... Like teaching LGBTQ doesn’t have to be teaching sex ed[ucation] ... It’s just being a normal thing.” In this approach, Eric adopts a pedagogy that normalizes LGBTQIA+ identities by integrating them within lessons about musicians, subtly and intentionally disrupting heteronormativity in the classroom. Instead of focusing on “teaching sex ed,” he presents sexuality as one of many intersecting identities, fostering inclusivity without making it the entire focus. For example, Figure 2 shows a PowerPoint slide featuring jazz musician Gary Burton that includes information about his personal and professional life, including his husband’s name.

Figure 2

Gary Burton PowerPoint Example



Like race and gender, Eric presents sexuality as a natural and ordinary aspect of a person's identity. He hopes this instructional approach becomes more common when discussing LGBTQIA+ identity and people. Since sexual identity is not always as visible as race or gender, intentionally foregrounding it can help destigmatize LGBTQIA+ identities and make them less taboo within school settings.

Beyond teaching his students about musicians with various sexual orientations and gender identities, Eric intentionally includes artists with multiple minoritized identities into his lessons. He expressed:

I know about my class, like, kids asking me for playlists and shit ... We listened like we did a Missy Elliott lesson. So, there's this cartoon video that gives you like ten facts about Missy Elliott. So, I showed them that. Then Missy has this video like a kid's video for *Pep Rally*, where you like to do dance steps and stuff. So, we did a Pep Rally. Some of the kids were like, "Oh, my mom plays this song."

This example shows how Eric exposes his students to a diverse range of musicians, particularly Black musicians, who are often excluded from traditional music curricula. His students continue to remain engaged and respond positively to the content. In doing so, Eric creates space in his classroom grounded in culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014) that functions as a counterstory, challenging dominant narratives about whose voices and experiences are recognized in music education. As shown below (Figure 3), his instruction features various female artists whose identities intersect across race, gender, ethnicity, age, and sexuality.

Figure 3

Women's History Month PowerPoint Example



Eric also takes the opportunity to teach students about contemporary musicians instead of focusing solely on traditional figures like Beethoven and Mozart, aligning more closely with his lived experiences as someone with multiple marginalized identities. In this figure and those before it, Eric broadens students' understanding of who a musician can be, what they can look like, and what music can sound like. The intentional inclusion of intersecting and minoritized identities in his lesson reflects his commitment to representation and to serving as a counterstory, challenging traditional narratives in music education. The safe environment Eric cultivates in the classroom allows students to foreground aspects of their own identities that they may have previously backgrounded or chosen not to disclose, highlighting how intersectionality shapes both teaching and learning.

Discussion and Implications

The findings offer valuable insights into the contemporary experiences of Black gay male teachers, as their experiential knowledge is critical in challenging dominant narratives and highlighting the intersectional realities of race, gender, and sexuality in schools. Using a case study approach, this study examined how a Black teacher's identities are negotiated and how they affect interactions within and outside the classroom. The data analysis revealed that Eric incorporates his various identities, including but not limited to race, gender, and sexuality, in every school space, which has been a helpful addition to his experience. However, his racial and

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gender identities are primarily foregrounded while others (e.g., sexual orientation) become visible depending on the context. Additionally, while his school has taken steps to celebrate diversity and promote representation, these efforts come across as superficial and tokenistic, indicating that more meaningful work is still needed to ensure Black male teachers feel a sense of belonging in schools. As Bristol & Martin-Fernandez (2019) note, Black educators may experience marginalization and a lack of recognition, contributing to feelings of being undervalued and pushed out of school environments.

Overwhelmingly, the findings align with existing research investigating the experiences of Black male teachers. Research has shown that “Black male teachers supply and receive a source of relatedness with Black students in racialized school environments” (D. Robinson, 2020, p. 535). Because teaching is inherently a relational profession, teachers need to bring their full selves into the classroom, as this shapes students’ trust, experiences, and sense of belonging. In his classroom, Eric made such connections with his students, particularly his Black students (10 out of 250), through his engaging, culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2014) and contemporary lesson plans. Bristol and Martin-Fernandez (2019) emphasize that “the presence of teachers who look similar and can relate to Black students may facilitate student engagement and motivation” (p. 149). By bringing their full, authentic selves, teachers can foster stronger connections, responsiveness, and inclusive instructional practices.

Even in a predominantly white school, Eric was able to build rapport, engage, and motivate his students by drawing on his other identities (e.g., race and gender). The importance of a Black male teacher cannot be overstated, as they make significant contributions to students, families, and community members. Eric’s presence also serves as a powerful “walking counter-narrative” to stereotypes, offering a positive and important representation of Black maleness and queerness (Tafari, 2013, p. 94). This aligns with the CRT tenet of experiential knowledge, which emphasizes the importance of sharing marginalized individuals’ lived experiences to challenge dominant narratives and assumptions (Solorzano, 1997). By being his authentic self, he challenges deficit and stereotypical narratives, affirms positive representation, and fosters social, emotional, and academic development for students. To support teachers like Eric, professional development training should be designed and delivered by male teachers of color (Bristol, 2015) to create connection and shared understanding among teachers with multiple minoritized identities (Annamma & Winn, 2019). Within these trainings, recognizing that identities are intersectional can create space to include LGBTQIA+ identities and issues in broader discussions of diversity, allowing connections across identities (C. Mayo, 2010). This is especially important as multiple systems of oppression intersect to shape life experiences, influence how identities are expressed, perceived, and valued within educational settings.

Moreover, Eric designed his music curriculum to reflect his students’ diverse identities, and he did not shy away from normalizing discussions of sexuality. For example, in one lesson, he clearly stated that jazz musician Gary Burton was married to a man of a different race. While J. B. Mayo (2007) found that “some gay teachers report[ed] discussing gay-centered topics in their classrooms at appropriate moments” (p. 455), for Eric, incorporating LGBTQIA+ topics was simply part of the curriculum, addressed alongside other identities. By foregrounding sexual identity, he normalized LGBTQIA+ representation and treated it as an ordinary part of a person, reflecting principles of QueerCrit that challenge heteronormativity in school (C. Mayo, 2010). His commitment to bringing all parts of himself is evident in his curriculum and instruction, where authenticity served as an instructional resource that disrupted heteronormative assumptions embedded in school curricula and culture.

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Furthermore, Eric's instruction enabled parents and guardians of his students, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, to attend his lessons virtually. His added value has also reached his students' parents and guardians, who have been supportive and acted as allies. This finding contrasts with J. B. Mayo's (2008) findings, in which teachers often reported not perceiving parents as allies. Thus, when teachers, like Eric, teach authentically, they build the same connection of trustworthiness and care with parents and guardians, and strengthen the school-home relationship that supports student well-being and learning. This difference might be because CWCS includes parents as valuable stakeholders in school decision-making and student support, demonstrating how the school draws on the families' experiential knowledge and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005).

However, to increase the presence of Black gay male teachers in classrooms, more work must be done to challenge and correct the longstanding stigmatization of LGBTQIA+ identity, particularly in education. As Eric shared, he still grapples with preconceived notions and fears of being labeled a pedophile, an association that has historically, and presently, continues to be falsely linked to gay identity in the United States. Consequently, this stigma may lead to LGBTQIA+ teachers avoiding foregrounding their sexual identity, resulting in relying on other identities that are more socially accepted or deciding not to come out at all (Palkki, 2015). Moreover, the reactions and responses from the broader community, specifically parents, provoked fear and concern when LGBTQIA+ teachers considered disclosing their sexuality (Endo et al., 2010). These concerns are reinforced by the social imaginary that frames homosexuality as deviant behavior, even though society has progressed toward greater acceptance of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Hart-Brinson, 2016), which calls for counterstories that disrupt harmful stereotypes and affirm the legitimacy and value of LGBTQIA+ identities within educational settings.

Additionally, identities like gay or queer have often been exclusive to "a white and male force" (Valdes, 1999, p. 1295), affecting how Eric self-identifies. This racialized framing of sexual identity leads him to foreground his racial and gender identities while backgrounding his sexuality. These internalized and socially constructed ideas need to be unpacked and corrected by examining the issues challenging LGBTQIA+ teachers face. Such investigations are vital because "once spoken, the sexuality of an LGB becomes public property" (Gray, 2013, p. 709), and their identity becomes "central to how others perceive them, instead of highlighting the many other aspects that define queer teachers" (Endo et al., 2010, p. 1029). For instance, Eric's decision to come out at the Pride Parade celebration reveals his growing comfort with foregrounding his sexual identity. However, the harmful associations, like the false link between gayness and pedophilia, continue to linger, and their impact is further intensified by the hypersexualization that Black men often face (Lynn, 2006). These stigmas underscore the need for school administrators to understand the challenges and realities LGBTQIA+ and Black teachers face and foster inclusive schools where their identities are seen as a beneficial asset for affirming students' sense of belonging, particularly as student populations continue to diversify. As D. Robinson (2020) states, "student populations have become more segregated, [but] diversity among teachers has not kept pace" (p. 533).

Understanding which identities teachers feel safe to disclose and which remain hidden can inform efforts to recruit and retain a more representative teaching force. More importantly, recognizing how identities are valued and hierarchically constructed (T. L. Robinson, 1999) allows educators and administrators to address stress-related instances of multiple marginalized identities. In doing so, schools can help "negate the longstanding effects of racism, sexism, and

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homophobia” and other forms of oppression (J. B. Mayo, 2008, p. 463). Moreover, an important factor in disrupting school culture, especially heteronormative environments (Connell, 2015), is the school's surrounding context. The school's location and district policies shape which curricula can be implemented and which identities are affirmed. For Eric, his school in Southern California is in a relatively progressive area. This environment has allowed Eric to openly discuss same-sex marriage (e.g., Gary Burton and his husband), incorporate activities from his culture (e.g., Soul Train lines), and encourage students to show up authentically. Such openness is possible because California has become more progressive with public attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ improving since the late 1970s (Lewis & Gossett, 2008). However, tolerance is shaped not only by location but also by factors such as race, religiosity, political affiliation (Chonody et al., 2014), and educational level (Lewis & Gossett, 2008). Thus, to foster more inclusive schools, it is crucial to engage individuals in more conservative and religious communities, as shifting their attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people can create new educational environments that welcome all intersecting identities (Chonody et al., 2014).

While there have been increasing efforts to recruit more Black male teachers (Bristol, 2018; Bristol & Martin-Fernandez, 2019), recruitment initiatives must also consider other minoritized identities, which will require not only targeted outreach but also structural and school-level support systems. From a CRT perspective, the tenet of intersectionality highlights how overlapping systems of oppression shape those in the teacher profession, emphasizing the need to identify and address the barriers teachers with multiple marginalized identities face (Annamma & Winn, 2019; Valdes, 1999). In this study, the creation of affinity groups provided safe spaces for peers to connect with others who shared similar identifications. Bristol & Martin-Fernandez (2019) note that recruiting teachers with similar racial identities helped retain more teachers in schools than did recruiting teachers who were alone. Still, when recruitment is insufficient, affinity groups may serve as a temporary solution. This highlights the urgency of clear, concrete plans to attract and retain teachers with multiple marginalized identities. Additionally, it is worth noting the importance of women in encouraging Black men to pursue teaching careers. Although this study did not focus on Eric's reasons for teaching, he credits a Puerto Rican woman with motivating him to join the profession. This finding aligns with prior research identifying women as key figures in Black male teacher recruitment (Tafari, 2013), underscoring their importance in such efforts. As Thomas-Durrell (2020) affirms, “the importance of Black men in the teaching force cannot be overstated” (p. 87), and this should include attention to sexual and gender identifications. Thus, recruiting Black men with intersecting marginalized identities is crucial to challenging systemic inequities and building a teaching profession that reflects and serves the diverse communities it educates.

Although not all teachers may foreground or disclose their sexual identity, recruitment efforts may preemptively provide information about anti-discrimination policies that support and protect sexually minoritized individuals. Schools and districts can begin by auditing their environments and then “enact[ing] policies that protect all competent and caring teachers regardless of their ethnicity, background, religion, socioeconomic status, or gender-sexual diversity” (Palkki, 2015, p. 24). Additionally, by eliciting and applying the experiential knowledge of marginalized individuals, schools can create spaces where all identities are affirmed and valued, bringing in “knowledge [that] is legitimate, appropriate, and critical” and ensuring teachers with multiple marginalized identities feel a genuine sense of belonging (Hayes, 2014a, p. 164).

Limitations

There are various methodological limitations to consider throughout this study. First, recall bias may be another limitation, as responses depend on participants' motivation, memory, and ability to respond (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Future research can address this limitation by incorporating journaling, real-time reflection, or required field notes to capture participants' experiences as they occur. Additionally, a case study approach and self-reported data cannot generalize the data for the broader population of Black gay male teachers, as it reflects personal perceptions. Further studies should include more teachers and observations of interactions among colleagues, parents, and students at school.

Conclusion

This study highlights a counterstory that disrupts dominant narratives about who belongs in the teaching profession and how teachers negotiate their identities within school contexts. Through CRT and Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological model, the study revealed how a Black gay male teacher navigates heteronormative school structures, foregrounding or backgrounding aspects of his identity, and how his experiences serve as a counterstory to prevailing assumptions about teachers' roles and belonging. Given a diversifying student population, cultivating a diverse teaching force is necessary. Recruitment efforts must intentionally prioritize teachers with multiple marginalized identities. However, to effectively recruit and retain these teachers, schools and districts must actively engage with experiential knowledge and lived realities and be willing to change environments and policies accordingly. Only then can schools begin to reflect a more equitable and just environment, where intersecting identities of staff and students are acknowledged, welcomed, and empowered to be fully visible.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Matthew R. Deroo and Dr. Cleveland Hayes for their invaluable feedback on this article. Additionally, this work would not have been possible without the generous participation of Eric, who is not only the focus of this study but also a dear friend. Finally, I want to thank my dog, Nala, for her joyful companionship and boundless energy throughout this process, reminding me to take breaks and keep moving forward.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-assisted Technologies

In preparing this manuscript, Grammarly and ChatGPT were used to support readability, identify spelling and grammatical errors, and assist with APA formatting. After using these tools, I reviewed and edited the content as necessary and assume full responsibility for the final version of the article.

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