



Modeling Manhood: Reimagining Black Male Identities in School

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This paper examines the process by which stereotypical mainstream representations of black males (as hard, as anti-school, and as disconnected from the domestic sphere) were reimagined in all-black, all-male manhood development classes for 9th graders in urban public high schools. Findings show that instructors debunked stereotypes and created new definitions of black manhood through the practice of modeling manhood, critiquing existing notions of black manhood, establishing a caring community, and role modeling new ways of being. [black manhood, role modeling, stereotypes, identity, education]

Introduction

It is an important time for discussions around black manhood. Recent events in the United States illustrate this: the brutal shootings of unarmed teenagers, both before and after Trayvon Martin, who was killed after being followed by an armed adult while walking home through a middle-class neighborhood one rainy evening in February of 2012. A trial ensued, and the white/Latino man who shot him was acquitted on all counts in the criminal trial. Perhaps most disturbing, according to scholarly and media analyses of the trial and the case, are the ways that Trayvon himself was on trial: the extent to which he was a “thug” or a good kid; his reasons for not calling the police; and whether or not he had gotten into trouble prior to the incident were all debated in the public. What was at issue was the extent to which Trayvon embodied the stereotypical notions of black manhood—as criminal, as anti-school, as hardcore. Implied here is that if he embodied these traits, he was less human and more deserving of the fate he met. Salient here is the way that stereotypical notions of urban black males are consonant with how they are treated in society—by the educational system, by the criminal justice system, and by society at large. It also brings to the fore how pervasive these stereotypical notions are, and how they are imposed upon young black men as they go about their daily lives.

In this article, we consider one program in a large urban school district that is seeking to disrupt such stereotypical representations of black manhood by supporting young black men in constructing identities that resist the problematic notions that confront them in society and in school. We draw on data from a district-wide all-black, all-male Manhood Development Program (MDP) to examine how existing stereotypical notions of black manhood were problematized and reimagined through the daily practices in the MDP classes.

The Prevalence of Racial Stereotypes Outside and Inside of Schools

Negative stereotypes are a consistent aspect of the black male experience (Du Bois 1903; Howard 2008). Research on race in schools has highlighted the multiple ways that

stereotypes manifest in schools and classrooms (Lewis 2003; Pollock 2004). Such stereotypes are not only about race but connote a racialized gendering (Baldridge, Hill, and Davis 2011; Noguera 1996). Three stereotypes about black male students are pervasive: they are anti-intellectual and anti-school, they are prone to criminality, and they are hard, unemotional, and disconnected from the domestic sphere (Ferguson 2000; Majors and Billson 1992). These stereotypes have a long history, from depictions of black men as lacking in moral fiber or intelligence (Douglass 1857) during slavery to being portrayed as dangerous primitive brutes in the film *Birth of a Nation* (Griffith 1915). The now infamous Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965) viewed black men as failing to accept the responsibility to care for their children, and federal campaigns like the *War on Drugs* and other efforts to reduce crime cast black men as prone to criminality and social vice (Alexander 2010).

Stereotypes are intimately tied to both the structures of racialization and the lived realities of students in school settings. Structurally, they are set within institutional frameworks that sustain oppression and inequality, where stereotypes provide an implicit rationale (Powell 2012). At the interpersonal level, they are perpetuated through "microaggressions" (Yosso, Ceja, and Solorzano 2000) or the multiple small-scale ways that stereotypes get deployed in interactions to position one as less capable (Torres, Driscoll, and Burrow 2010). Microaggressions are common in schools and can have severe psychological consequences (Sellers et al. 2006; Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000). Exposure to stereotypes and microaggressions also affect black male students' identities. Margaret B. Spencer (1995) theorizes how youth's sense of self is constructed in relation to stereotypes. More pointedly, Niobe Way et al. (2013) document how black male youth shaped their racial identities by drawing upon stereotypes.

Navigating stereotypical identities is a considerable challenge for black male students in schools (Noguera 2003). Research has documented how stereotypes influence black males' lives in and out of the classroom (Carter 2005; Lewis 2003; Nasir et al. 2012), including youth's own reflections on how they navigate being stereotyped and the burden this imposes upon them. For instance, Janelle Dance (2002) recounts an incident where, based on their clothing, a group of high school students were taken for "gangbangers" by a white observer. Dance points out how these racialized exchanges are a form of symbolic violence that reflect the tendency to "look at Black and Brown males, not see them, and then, assault them with stereotypes and negative racial icons that exemplify the subtle and pervasive exercise of symbolic power wielded by the American mainstream" (Dance 2002:128). Gilberto Q. Conchas, Leticia Oseguera, and James D. Vigil (2012) relay young black male students' sentiments about how media portrayals of black men support various misconceptions of them as less capable and potentially dangerous. Young black men are required to navigate these acts of symbolic violence and are bound by the monolithic ideas about who they are.

The nature of the racial identities black male students take up have implications for their psychological well-being and educational outcomes (Youdell 2003). Research has shown that students with stronger racial identities have lower levels of perceived stress (Caldwell et al. 2002), higher self-esteem, more adaptive coping strategies, and display less anti-social behaviors (Hughes et al. 2009; Mandara et al. 2009). Positive racial identities also have a protective function, in that they mediate the effect of discrimination experiences, such that students with strong racial identities were less likely to develop problem behaviors in reaction to experiences of discrimination (Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff 2003). Research has also found that racial identities and a connection to community are linked to stronger academic performance (Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee 2008; Byrd and Chavous 2009; Oyserman et al. 2003). In addition, students with stronger racial identities were more engaged in school (Hughes et al. 2009) and more likely to attend college (Chavous et al. 2003). Similarly, Prudence Carter (2010) has found that many students who are

academically successful come to see themselves as boundary crossers and develop strong academic identities and strong proactive racial identities.

While research has documented how African American male students are required to navigate the pervasiveness of stereotypical black male identities and the importance of a positive racial identity to psychological well-being and academic outcomes, we know much less about how to support black boys in developing positive identities. Research on identity development in community-based organizations has argued that “building a healthy racial and ethnic identity among African American youth is an important aspect of the healing process” (Ginwright 2010:122) and views this healing as important for positive academic outcomes (Ginwright 2009). Bianca Baldrige, Marc L. Hill, and James E. Davis (2011) describe a community-based program, EmpowerYouth, that worked to re-imagine black male youth as “worthwhile sites of investment, support, and care” (134), and, in doing so, established caring relationships between adults and youth that opened up new possibilities for young men to see themselves as having expanded identity options beyond the stereotypes. Key to this identity-building work is providing access to expanded notions of black manhood that are not monolithic or limited to stereotypical portrayals (Neville, Viard, and Turner 2014). These studies point to some of the promising identity work being done in out-of-school settings.

Focusing on teaching in schools, some have argued for the potential of critical pedagogy to support the development of healthy identities for students of color, in addition to fostering critical thinking skills and classroom engagement. Critical pedagogy argues that there must be a fundamental shift in the teacher–student relationship in which teachers become “teacher-students” (Freire 1970) who are self-reflective of the myriad ways they can be complicit in reproducing dominant ideologies (McLaren 1998). Critical pedagogy requires teachers to work collectively with their students (Giroux 1988) to create a “critical paradigm” (Shor 1992) that respects and highlights the funds of knowledge students bring with them into the classroom (Moll et al. 1992). Educators practicing critical pedagogy have highlighted the significance of engaging youth popular culture and cultural narratives in the development of transformative curriculum for students of color (Akom 2009; Camangian 2010; Hill 2009; Morrell and Duncan-Andrade 2004). For example, Jeffrey M. Duncan-Andrade’s (2007, 2009) scholarship on critical pedagogy has emphasized the effectiveness of those educators who “focused on raising the human element of educational attainment that most schools pay little attention to measuring—positive self-identity, purpose, and hope” (2007:635). While these scholars document the important role of critical pedagogy in supporting positive student identities, the racialized/gendered elements of these identities remain underexamined.

In this paper, we describe a program that attempts to disrupt stereotypes and to create opportunities for expanded notions of black manhood in the context of a Manhood Development class in a public high school. We examine how this program makes new identities available and the processes, structures, and interactions that support these expanded identity opportunities. Specifically, we ask: What notions of black manhood were conveyed to students in the Manhood Development classes and through what processes were these notions made available to students?

Theoretical Frame

We examine how instructors in the classes took up and reframed stereotypical notions of black masculinity, namely that black males are hard and unemotional, are anti-school, are criminals, and do not participate in the domestic sphere. By debunking them, instructors sought to provide new opportunities for the young men to see themselves without the constraints imposed by stereotypes. In this section, we outline the theoretical tools that

elucidate how stereotypical notions were reframed in the context of the Manhood Development classes.

We draw upon two key concepts to describe how black manhood was reframed in MDP. The first concept, *identity resources* (Nasir 2012), presumes that social and learning environments make available resources for identity development that individuals in that setting can take up. This concept has its roots in social interactional perspectives on identity (Goffman 1959; Mead 1934) and in sociocultural and ecological theories (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Cole 1996; Wenger 1998) concerned with the centrality of the social context of development. Na'ilah Nasir (2012) argues that cultural and social spaces provide possible resources for identity development, including *material*, *relational*, and *ideational* resources. *Material resources* are the ways the physical environment and artifacts present tell you about who you are and who you can be. *Relational resources* are how the relationships with others in the setting provide us with information about who we are (and are not) through our affiliations and the identities they support. Finally, *ideational resources* refer to ideas about who one is and about what is valued in the setting. Stereotypes are an ideational resource in that they are ideas that are artifacts in a setting that we use to draw meaning from the world.

The second concept is *identity constellations*, which is a new concept derived from the data in this study. This concept attends to the ways that identities come in sets; that is, one aspect of one's identity can have implications for other aspects. It is related to Etienne Wenger's (1998) notion of "constellations of practices," which denotes how individuals participate in a related collection of practices that together inform their identities. For instance, one common identity constellation is that of a science nerd, where the identities as a science learner are grouped with being socially awkward and non-athletic. This concept is critical for understanding how black male identities take shape, because negative stereotypes about black male students can be understood as a particular constellation of identities that are powerfully defined in our society. One problem that racial stereotypes create is that black and male tend to be paired with non-achiever or criminal in the social imagination in our society. This constellation can be highly problematic and can foreclose the possibilities for other identities to be developed.

As we analyze the reimagining process in the Black Manhood Development classes, we note how instructors make available resources for identity construction and in doing so create new constellations of black male identity with students, expanding the prevailing notions of black manhood, and thus better supporting the academic engagement and identities of students.

Setting and Context

This study was conducted in the Manhood Development Program (MDP) classes administered by the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD). Faced with problematic trends in outcomes for African American males, the OUSD created the Office of African American Male Achievement (AAMA) in 2010 to much controversy (OUSD n.d.).¹ While African American males and females lagged behind their white counterparts academically, when considering race and gender together, the disparities are even more extreme. For example, in 2009, 28% of black males scored proficient or higher on the English Language Arts California Standards Test (CST), compared to 78% of their white male counterparts. Similarly, while 76% of white males scored proficient or higher on the math CST, only 30% of black males scored proficient. In that same year, the graduation rate for African American males was only 49%.

In Oakland, African American boys composed 17% of the OUSD student population in 2010–11 yet they composed 42% of students suspended (Urban Strategies 2012). That same

year, percentages of suspensions across grades (K–12) show a similar disproportionality with one in five African American male students having been suspended that year as compared to less than one in ten male students of any other race or less than one in 20 female students of any race. These trends are consistent with studies that have shown that African American male student behaviors are more harshly perceived than those of other students and that black boys disproportionately encounter the academic and social consequences of school discipline (Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera 2010; Monroe 2005).

To capitalize upon the links between attendance and academic performance, AAMA's mission was to increase attendance rates while lowering suspension and expulsion rates (<http://www.ousd.k12.ca.us//Domain/78>). An initiative of AAMA, the Manhood Development Program (MDP) was built on the premise that stereotypical notions of black masculinity have shaped the way young black men self-identify and that these identities are systematically stigmatized in academic spaces and conflict with academic success. Thus, a goal of MDP was to *cultivate healthy identities among black male students* as a means to improve black male achievement.

Beginning in the spring of 2011, the program was instituted in several district high schools and one middle school. Targeting mainly 9th grade African American male students with a range of academic performance levels, school administrators selected cohorts of approximately twenty black males at each site² for the MDP classes, for which they received elective credits. At some sites students could opt in at their freshman orientation, other sites made personal calls to parents requesting student participation. The course was presented as a leadership opportunity in which students were encouraged to participate. An African American male from the local community led the daily elective course during school hours. AAMA officials selected instructors through informal community nominations; all of them were previously involved in various community organizations and had a history of effectively working with young black men. The curriculum was designed to address student emotional, academic, and social needs and to encourage students' awareness of self and of their communities' cultural and racial history with the understanding that these aspects may support positive notions of blackness, manhood, and education. The methods of instruction therefore relied heavily upon discussions about contemporary issues, managing social and academic situations, and critical analysis of popular media like songs and movies. Race was implicitly acknowledged in the classes by the fact that all the students and instructors were black and male and explicitly acknowledged in the conversations between peers and instructors.

Our study examined the MDP classes over two years at six different sites. Sites held similar community norms, which were predicated on a notion of brotherhood that played out in how students addressed instructors (e.g., Brother Malik, Brother James, etc.) and interacted with one another. The idea of brotherhood was central and translated to valuing accountability for one another ("I am my brother's keeper"), dependability (being in class on time and helping one another out), forgiveness (requiring students to make formal apologies before the class if they disrespected the space or someone), and acknowledgment of shared pasts (i.e., that they are all "from the same place"). These core values were threaded across the MDP sites and were integral to the process of reimagining new ideas of black manhood that we discuss in the findings.

Nonetheless, there were some variations in pedagogical style and teacher positionality in the school community across sites. For example, Brother Tonio was in his early forties and was the only instructor with previous ties to his school site. He served as an administrator at his school, which allowed him a unique form of access to his students throughout the day and to other administrators and teachers. His style of instruction, while affable, was somewhat rigid in form and fairly stern. During interviews, students referred to him as a father figure, while other instructors were often likened to a brother. Brother

Jelani was also perceived as a father figure because of his age (mid-forties) and that the middle school students he worked with were similar in age to his oft-referenced children. Brother Jelani had worked at a local college and with a variety of youth and community programs. He relied heavily on creative expression in his lesson plans and was stern yet affectionate in his approach. The other three instructors were younger (late twenties–early thirties), including Brother Jay, a lecturer at a community college, who relied primarily on lecturing, including using multi-media presentations and small group projects. He also utilized his identity as boxer, chef, *and* lecturer to model the possibilities of fluidly navigating seemingly contradictory identities. Brother Phil, a poet/writer, relied heavily on personal narrative and dialogue. He also made explicit efforts to construct creative lesson plans and at the same time be spontaneous by heading outdoors and rearranging the class set-up. Brother Penn, a journalist and recent college graduate, frequently used rapping or other forms of personal dialogue to engage students and was conscientious about setting up the physical space of the classroom to facilitate dialogue.

Methodology

The data for this study are drawn from observations and video data from the MDP classrooms and from interviews³ with 48 students and six instructors across the program sites. The research effort spanned two years, from September 2010 to June 2012. Members of the research team included one African American female faculty member, one African American female postdoctoral researcher, one African American female graduate student, and one African American male graduate student. All of the researchers shared a sense of racial identity with the participants, though the male researcher also shared an identity as male. As the MDP classes were racialized and gendered spaces, the research team determined that the male graduate student's positionality would be least disruptive to the classroom space, and he conducted all in-class observations. All members of the research team conducted interviews.

Observations

Observations were conducted in each of the two years of data collection. In year 1, 13 observations were carried out across two different sites one to two times a week. In year 2 of the study, 24 observations took place across four sites, visiting at least two sites per week. Of the four MDP sites, three were located in high schools, and one of them was carried out as a junior high after-school program.

During observations, the African American male graduate student researcher was in his early twenties; he was introduced at the beginning of the program and attended sessions each week. The researcher did not engage in the class activities unless explicitly invited to by the students and/or instructor; he primarily quietly observed classroom interactions and activities. He took field notes during the observations, which focused on recording the activities and artifacts of the class. The videos captured the instructors' pedagogical choices and discourse with students.

Interviews

Researchers conducted semistructured interviews with students from the MDP classes during the last month of the spring semester in both years of data collection. In year 1, all students in the MDP classes across the three sites were invited to participate in the interviews, contingent upon their submission of the parental consent forms. All students who turned in the consent forms and were present during the scheduled interview days were interviewed. This resulted in a sample of 23 student interviews and an interview with

one of the instructors after the school year concluded. In year 2, we interviewed only students in the four sites we were observing. This resulted in a sample of 20 student interviews, one focus group with the middle school students ($N = 6$), and three instructor interviews.

Student interviews were focused on students' experiences in MDP classes and in their schools and their perceptions of those experiences. Teacher interviews focused on gathering information about the instructors' backgrounds, their vision and goals for the class, and their perspectives on black manhood, discipline, academic achievement, and teacher-student relationships. All but one instructor was interviewed. Interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed.

Data Analysis

The interview and observational (field notes and video) data were interpreted qualitatively. All interview transcripts and field notes were iteratively coded and analyzed using the software HyperRESEARCH (Strauss and Corbin 1998) with subsequent rounds of coding used to refine codes and develop subcodes that reflected researchers' shared interpretation of the data. The final codes centered on four main issues related to the ways instructors and students were identifying stereotypical notions of black manhood and working with students to disrupt them: stereotypical notions of black manhood, breaking down/countering stereotypes, supporting students in dealing with their emotions, and creating a caring environment and caring relationships.

After several rounds of coding the interview data, the research team analyzed the video data of the class sessions. The first pass involved the development of written summaries of the videos, and the second utilized these summaries to highlight instances where instructors and students were interrogating stereotypical notions of black manhood and reimagining the possibilities for positive and productive black male identities through explicit verbal exchanges or implicit meanings, seeming norms, and subtle modes of communication within the MDP communities. The video summaries were then discussed with the entire research team and oriented the team to particularly salient video segments that highlighted both the content of the black male identities that were being reimagined as well as the process by which that reimagining occurred. Those selected segments were then transcribed.

Findings

In this section, we detail the process by which Manhood Development instructors supported young men in reimagining the possibilities for black manhood. Our findings demonstrate that instructors supported students in reimagining notions of black manhood to demonstrate that it could include (1) feeling and expressing emotion; (2) embracing relationships with others, including fatherhood; and (3) connecting to a tradition of achievement and African Americans contributors to society. These three dimensions were introduced through explicit conversations, a caring environment, and a form of role modeling, which included the instructors and a historical inventory of African American figures. While we recognize each instructors' engagement of these three dimensions hinged upon their respective perspectives and style, we argue that these instructors were agential in their intention to resist dominant stereotypes. They created classes and lessons where they built on identity resources to construct new identity constellations that revealed the expansive possibilities of black manhood.

Black Manhood and Emotional Management

Instructors worked to disrupt the stereotype that black men are hard and unemotional, that is, that they do not show or express emotions (other than anger), and to provide students with counterexamples that better reflect the humanity and diversity of black manhood. First, they had explicit conversations with students about engaging emotions and modeled a range of emotional expression. Second, they created a classroom community where “dealing with your emotions” was a priority, where love and care were central to the instructor–student relationship and were encouraged within the peer group.

Role Modeling and Explicit Discussions about Dealing with Emotions

A central idea in MDP classes was that acknowledging and expressing emotions does not make one less masculine. The instructors were explicit about this, yet they openly admitted that they as black men struggled with it. In the following excerpt, Brother Phil led a conversation on the concept of masculinity with his students and addressed how being hard had become a performative aspect of black male posturing. Using himself as a model, Brother Phil said:

Sometimes as black men we feel the need to kind of puff our chest up, when we, when we get out here, and you know, and, and present ourselves to be bigger than we seem before. . . You know what I’m saying, so I want y’all to keep that in mind when, you know, sometimes, we all do it. I get it, last Thursday, I felt like I had to walk out here with my chest up. . . I felt like I needed to, to be, strong, like hard. You know what I mean, because I was really hurting. I was hurting really bad on Thursday. Y’all seen it, I was, I was hurting. But I felt like I had to be like [He sticks his chest out to demonstrate]. And that just shows I teach y’all that you don’t have to do that right? But even though I teach you guys that, it doesn’t make me a hypocrite, it just makes me human. [Video content log, April 26, 2012]

This instructor articulated how black men often employ a “cool pose” as a way to avoid vulnerability. As opposed to acknowledging his hurt and frustration he felt like he had to “puff [his] chest up. . . and present [himself] to be bigger.” While he’s critical of this practice, which is perceived to be the masculine way of dealing with anger, he acknowledged that he, too, as a black man, is guilty of it at times. In sharing this, Brother Phil modeled that it is okay to be emotional and recognize your feelings, and he was explicitly discussing an alternative to the dominant representation of black men as unemotional. He also challenged the shame black men may feel about being hurt or wanting to cry (Johnson, Pate, and Givens 2010). Later he connects this to the dominant narratives about black men by quoting a film he and the students had watched that noted, “there is a lineage of black men who want to deny their own frailty,” suggesting that those who deny their emotions and full scope of their feelings deny a core aspect of their humanity. Here, Brother Phil leverages his connection to his students as a relational resource to model and emphasize alternative approaches for dealing with emotions that do not perform or react to stereotypes but resist them. The repeated nature of these socioemotional conversations across class sites offered a black male identity where the work of dealing with one’s emotions was presented as a critical part of black manhood and an act of agency to reclaim their humanity.

Emotional Sharing and Safe Spaces

Another part of resisting stereotypes about black males involved helping students discuss personal aspects of their lives and participate in emotional sharing with one another. Instructors wanted students to understand that emotional sharing was an integral component of healthy black masculinity. Brother Jay noted,

We talked about grief because we were talking about what happens when we don't emote um and you're grieving—like when you have a cold, you know there's some physical symptoms or something. So like if you don't like emote that, is there a sickness that starts to create inside of you? So, we talk about that you know, um, and I want them to just feel like kind of culturally competent in a way or aware of themselves. [Instructor interview, June 2012]

Suggesting that black manhood was not contingent upon students' ability to hold everything inside became a critical aspect of reimagining the boundaries of black masculinity. To create a space where emotional vulnerability was acceptable, instructors reinforced the safeness of the space and made clear that "what happens in here stays in here." This rule provided an important relational resource that facilitated the transformation of the classroom into a support system and a place where students participated in emotional sharing and let their guards down.

For example, during one class a student mentioned that his grandmother was on her death bed. Soliciting advice from the class, the instructor asked, "How do you deal with loss?" Another student shared that his mother's boyfriend was abusive to her (Video content log, June 4, 2012). This led to a class discussion during which the instructor shared a story about his father being abusive to his mom. These types of conversations signal that beyond the big brother role, these instructors saw themselves as relational resources and viewed their class, including the peer-to-peer relationships, as constituting a family who could discuss difficult and personal topics.

Disciplinary issues were other opportunities for emotional sharing. In another observation, two students intended to fight later in the day but the instructor pulled them out of their regular classes to work through the problem before things escalated (Nasir et al. 2012). In framing why he pulled the students together, the instructor linked one student's experiences with the other and noted that they had a lot to learn from each other. Through their conversation, both students shared emotional stories about their home lives and came to understand each other better. This is a salient example of how the MDP class became a space for students to try on new identity constellations—one in which black men sat down and talked through their differences and one where they could practice new ways of being.

Instructors were also concerned that students did not have other spaces within schools where they could honestly express themselves. When asked about the kinds of spaces they aimed to create, one instructor noted he wanted to "create a culture where they felt safe, nurtured, and that they could kind of let down that mask and not be or need to feel like they were on the block" (Brother Tonio's interview, June 2012). This statement reflects how the development of a safe space for students was neither happenstance nor reactionary; rather, it was an intentional act of resistance that reflects the instructor's understanding of the experiences and needs of black male youth. Instructors developed lessons and created classroom environments where a central task was to challenge and interrogate stereotypes, as well as legitimize alternate ways of being. Creating a safe space where emotional sharing was encouraged necessitated building humanizing relationships with students that counteracted the dehumanizing experiences of African American males in society writ large.

Black Manhood as Being Intimately Connected to Others

To combat dominant images of black manhood, the identity constellations made available in MDP classes placed a high value on relationships. Three key aspects of relational black masculinity were discussed: (1) how black men engage with their children, (2) how black men engage with women, and (3) how they interact with one another. One instructor stated, "What we're gonna start diving into is the concept of masculinity and what it means to be a man. And that's one thing you guys are gonna have to learn on your

own. But it's also somethin' you can be given information about to learn how to conduct yourself properly as you get to that point" (Video content log, April 26, 2012). These discussions offered opportunities to critique how these three types of relationships were typically portrayed—including stereotypes of absent fathers, misogynistic conceptions of womanhood, and violent peer relationships. Through the modeling provided by instructors and the caring community created through their pedagogy, students were exposed to identity constellations that recognized possibilities for being engaged fathers, for honoring black women, and for developing caring relationships with ones' brothers.

Fatherhood

Brother Jay opened his MDP class one session with the following writing prompt: "When I have a son, I will teach him ____" (Video content log, May 21, 2012). Students were prompted to privately write down lessons they wanted to pass on to their male children. This activity was centered upon nurturing the image of the students as caring and engaged fathers and positioning them as having the agency to foster this identity in the future. During conversations such as this, students often discussed their troubling relationships with their fathers, as did some of the instructors. This particular activity supported students in challenging the societal stereotypes, and in some cases their lived experiences, to reimagine new identity possibilities for themselves as future black fathers.

Demonstrating love for family and intimate interactions with their children was another way that instructors employed their personal experiences to serve as a model. Brother Jay said in an interview, "Of 21 of the boys [in his class], three grew up with their fathers so I think it was important for them to have positive male images" (Instructor interview, June 2012). The instructors, almost all of who were fathers, made clear their roles as active parents in the lives of their children. For example, Brother Phil reflected on how he enjoyed playing with his son every night before bedtime. Likewise, Brother Tonio's daughter was a main character in many of his stories—constantly highlighting that fatherhood and time spent with his children was a valued aspect of who he was.

Instructors also pushed back against gender norms with respect to domestic tasks. Two examples highlight this: in one instance Brother Jay offered to cook something for a class potluck, and in another Brother Jelani cradled a baby in his arms as he talked to his class. In both instances the students initially laughed, but Brother Jelani continued rocking the child and Brother Jay reassured the students that there was nothing wrong with a man cooking—that he actually does it often when he has friends and/or family over. In these moments, MDP instructors destabilized dominant notions of black manhood and modeled new identity constellations that students could choose for themselves. While we cannot speculate the long-term effects of this modeling, at times students immediately took up new constellations, as was the case with Brother Jelani and the baby. He encouraged students to come "and make her [the baby] smile" (Video content log, March 27, 2012). The students proceeded to compete with one another and took turns holding her.

Together, students and instructors painted a future where boys could be responsible black fathers and men entrusted with the care of family and relationships. The students could also look to their instructors' relationships with their children as models of black fatherhood and imagine how they would teach, love, and care for their own children one day.

Relationships with Women

Black manhood was also discussed in relationship to black womanhood. Using popular hip hop songs, the instructors raised questions about the lyrical content, which often underscored ideas around black masculinity that typically go unchallenged. In one session, the students were watching a documentary on hip hop, *Beyond Beats and Rhymes*

(Hurt 2006), which led to a discussion where Brother Phil introduced the concepts of sexism and misogyny.

- Phil: There's two definitions that I wrote on the board right now, that I want you guys to know so you understand the terms when they come up. The first one is sexism. And the definition of sexism is a prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. . . . So just like when you say um, just like if you hear somebody say, Oh she can't throw a tennis ball further than 2 feet, cuz she's a girl and she throws like this. That's a form of sexism. You're basing it off of her gender. So once again it's prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination, typically against women, on the basis of sex. This is the most important one I want you guys to pay attention to while we watch this over the next two days. Misogyny. You said you heard the word misogynistic. [...] The word misogyny is the hatred of women by men. There is a lot, and one thing it's gonna touch on, you're gonna learn, when it comes to hip hop and the music we love and we live, that I still do to this day, there's a lot of misogyny. So you hear all day, what do we call women in rap?
- Students: Bitches.
- Phil: Right. All all day, is that a term of endearment?
- Students: No.
- Phil: Right, it's a negative term, right? So misogyn-, misogyny is really really prevalent in hip hop. And so that's one thing it's gonna touch on. His goal is just to expose some of these things and to see how we treat people. And hopefully you guys think about how you look at certain things within hip hop as well. [Video content log, April 26, 2012].

Here the instructor exposed the students to two new terms, sexism and misogyny, by using their knowledge of popular music to expose how women are represented and to problematize the practice of referring to women as "bitches." He encouraged his students to "think about how [they] look at certain things within hip hop." In other words, to employ a critical lens, or a filter, when processing ideas and messages related to their masculinity.

Instructors also engaged students in explicit conversations about black male–female relationships. In one instance, students were participating in an activity where they were asked to list items that give men status, and one student said "girls." Taking this up as a teachable moment, the instructor stopped the student from writing that on the board because "I asked for items, and women are not objects" (Video content log, February 2, 2012). Through his comments, the MDP instructor modeled a mindset that encouraged a critique of the objectification of black women and challenged dominant portrayals of black men as misogynistic. While this incident may not have completely changed the way MDP students thought about women, it demonstrates the ways in which MDP instructors modeled alternative conceptions of black manhood in relationship to women.

In an interview, when a student was asked if there were any valuable lessons he would take from the MDP class, he talked about how his use of the "B-word" was challenged in the class when the instructor showed positive images of black women over historical time ("he was teaching us about queens") and encouraged him to think of all black women as he thinks of his mother (Student interview 612, Spring 2012). This student's reflection highlights how MDP instructors' efforts to challenge dominant representations of black women offered an alternative way to consider black womanhood. Providing students with access to positive representations of black women revealed a model of black manhood that honored and revered black women. It offered students new identity constellations of masculinity that were not dependent on the subjugation of black women.

Relationships with Other Black Men

Instructors regularly and explicitly acknowledged their care for students; in these instances instructors were modeling that expressing love for others was a vital part of black

manhood. These connections between students and MDP instructors served as a relational resource for how black men should engage with one another. It was not uncommon to hear instructors tell students they cared about them unconditionally. One instructor commented, "This class is what I live for. You guys gonna get tired of me before I get tired of you" (Video content log, February 23, 2012). In this comment, the instructor explicitly acknowledged that the class and these boys had a place in his life outside of the classroom space. Furthermore, by noting that the boys would tire of him first, he let the students know that his care was unconditional. Another instructor commented, "I don't have to be here, I'm here because I care." Instructors found it important to verbally express their feelings for their students. One instructor commented on these verbalizations of care, "I think it was new for them in some ways. Because I had students say to me: you care. So you been with teachers you felt like didn't care. Yeah. No, no Jelani cared. So it really made a difference" (Instructor interview, Spring 2012).

MDP instructors' explicit demonstrations of care extended to transparent conversations around love. Each instructor acknowledged their love for their students in a deliberate attempt to aid their students in reimagining themselves as loveable and as deserving of love. Thus, the relationships between instructor and student provided critical relational resources to students that allowed students to understand themselves in new and affirming ways via their relationships with their teachers. Further, the demonstration of care by instructors allowed students to witness a black man openly express his love and care for others. One instructor offered, "From a manhood perspective, you don't hear that enough between brothers...we need to show love to each other and to ourselves more often" (Brother Tonio instructor interview, Spring 2012). Hence, the idea of instructors declaring their love for students was also about reframing the way black males can and should interact with one another.

While black males are often stereotyped as hard or unemotional, instructors provided ideational resources that helped to reframe students' understanding of who they were and reimagine who they should be with each other. Instructors declared their love for students and encouraged students to demonstrate love with one another. In an interview Brother Jelani stated,

There was one brother for example that was having a tough time. I said uh, you know, he needs some extra love so let's give him a group hug. Of course he ran. And we all caught him. But afterwards, aaww, he was lit up. Like you could just see he was like [makes a huge smile], it just made his day. So, why do I go back to love? Because love works. If it's not rooted in my work then I'm just working, getting a paycheck. I don't do that. I'm beyond that. [Instructor interview, Spring 2012]

In this example, Brother Jelani shares how the brotherly love within the MDP class had verbal and physical dimensions that challenged students' notions of acceptable manifestations of black manhood, which had a positive impact on students. It follows that this notion of a larger brotherhood extended beyond the classroom and the work instructors understood themselves to be doing utilized the classroom space as an entry point into the world beyond school walls.

Another method instructors utilized to demonstrate care inside and outside of the classroom was both explicit and subtle positive reinforcement to facilitate students' reimagining of themselves with positive academic identities. One instructor informed students, "You're all doing wonderful. That's what I expect from you. You're on point and taking care of business" (Video content log, March 22, 2012). In this instance, the instructor reinforced the notion that the students were doing exactly what he expected of them *academically*; by praising the students for their academic behavior, he was positively reframing black manhood through the presumption of academic excellence. The instructor

was not only resisting the stereotype of black males as anti-school but also provided positive ideational resources for his students to draw upon. Instructors also utilized more subtle methods of positive reinforcement. Instructors reinforced care with a hand on the shoulder, a pat on the back, or a simple smile and a head nod. One student in particular gave voice to what it looked like for them as young black men to take on this newly constellated identity within the caring environment of the MDP class:

- Interviewer: OK. OK. What are your interactions like with your peers in this class?
 Benjamin: We all brothers. It's like, one fall down I help them back up. If I fall down they help me back up. [Student interview 717, Spring 2012]

As a relational identity resource, the intimate relationships that formed between the instructors and the students served to combat the monochromatic stereotypes of the black man as hard, disconnected from family, and associated with violence.

Black Manhood: A Tradition of Achievement and Societal Contributions

Another way that MDP classes expanded conceptions of black manhood was to reimagine black male identity to include making important contributions to society. Instructors used a historical inventory of black male leaders and actively envisioned new identity constellations through presenting students with a variety of historical black figures, guest speakers, and class visitors. The achievement of black male leaders, inventors, and artists offered identity constellations that included making meaningful contributions to society. One student's explanation about how his MDP class differed from other classes highlights this:

- Samuel: Because in normal history they don't talk about what black people have accomplished.
 Interviewer: Why is it important to talk about what black folks have accomplished?
 Samuel: Because that make us seem like we're at the bottom of the food chain, like we're not worth anything.
 Interviewer: And learning about that makes you feel different, or -
 Samuel: Makes me feel like we've done something. . . Because it makes me want to be a part of that. [Student interview 614, Spring 2012]

In his reflection, the student emphasized the fact that learning about black leaders and black history was empowering to him. Through these examples he was able to discover a black manhood that was consistent with achievement and "doing something." Most important, this knowledge made him want to be a part of that legacy and to envision himself as a future leader.

The use of historical figures such as Malcolm X, Frederick Douglass, and Marcus Garvey is an extension of the role modeling process. When asked about his focus on African American men in history, Brother Jay responded:

Why did I focus on it? Are you serious? I grew up in Oakland. I just remember feeling like when I knew about myself, as a young person I just felt different, like I had more pride, I felt more confident, and I went to school for African American studies undergrad and grad school. (...) I recognize the reason why the street has so much appeal to it is because that's what's being sold to them as what a black man is. And I know that when I taught them about Paul Robeson they was like, Dang! I could see it in they face—this is someone that we could become? This is a model for us? I could just see it, you know. Um so to me it was really important. It's a necessity if you don't get it at home because it builds up who you are. [Instructor interview, Spring 2012]

The instructors taught the students about black male historical figures with the intention of instilling racial pride but also to problematize stereotypical notions of black manhood.

Above, Brother Jay revealed his awareness of the limitations of the identity constellations offered to black men and consciously drew upon this historical inventory to upend the power of the negative representations imposed on his students' lives. In reflecting on how the knowledge of this legacy impacted him, one student stated, "I feel empowered to be black; I'm actually trying to speak out more in the class. To show what I've learned to actually start a conversation" (Student interview 615, Spring 2012).

The frequency with which the instructors highlighted examples of black manhood that resisted stereotypical notions supports the claim that it was an intentional practice. Instructors often brought in guest speakers, from community activists to artists and businessmen, to expose their students to a network of black men who embodied the diverse achievements of black manhood.

Brother Jay stated, "I think what I really try to do is have them take pride in being a black man. Give them a model of what a black man should be like so I brought in several brothas that were successful to talk about their journey" (Instructor interview, Spring 2012). Here, Brother Jay highlights how role modeling was a key aspect of the Manhood Development curriculum. The historical inventory was memories of the past that extended to contemporary black men who could stand before students as living examples of what the possibilities of black manhood were. The instructors, guests speakers, men featured in the films watched in class, and the students themselves composed the historical legacy that offered an expansive scale of black manhood—a legacy that positioned black men as meaningful contributors to society.

Discussion of Findings

This article's primary purpose was to analyze how instructors in an alternative, in-school program for black male youth reimagined and shared with youth an expansive notion of black manhood. The reimagining process highlighted the agency of students to disavow stereotypical, dominant images of black men and to instead create new possibilities to construct for themselves what it meant to be black and male. The reimagining process occurred through the pedagogical strategies of role modeling, explicit conversations, and the creation of a caring community.

We found that the MDP instructors, as black males, often provided a lens through which students were able to explore the multidimensional aspects of their own identities. Over the course of the school year, historical figures discussed in the class, along with black male guest speakers and visitors, provided additional opportunities for youth to study and interact with the multiple portrayals of black manhood. These alternatives debunked essentialized caricatures of black manhood as hard, anti-domestic, and criminal. Instead, they demonstrated that black manhood is inclusive of mature emotional management, responsible relationships with others (particularly women and children, as well as other men), and consonant with achievement and being meaningful contributors to society.

Explicit discussions of stereotypes and alternatives were also central to the MDP approach. The instructors made a point to allow students to articulate their ideas on manhood, which often became a springboard for class discussions. By centering students' voices in this process, MDP instructors made them co-contributors to the reimagining process. Our findings demonstrate how the instructors were intentional and explicit in generating conversations about stereotypes and in linking those conversations to their African American male students' understanding of how such stereotypes play out in and beyond schools. This included providing students with emotional and practical support to manage and navigate these biases. Instructors viewed creating the class as a safe space for expressing their emotions and feelings as essential to being able to provide such support. The role modeling and explicit conversations that occurred within the MDP classes were

thus predicated upon a level of care and communality within the MDP classes that aided instructors' ability to engage students in problematizing existing notions of black manhood and reimagine themselves in opposition to negative societal stereotypes.

In these ways, MDP classes provided new identity resources and encouraged students to embody new identity constellations that revealed the expansive possibilities of black manhood. In this paper, we analyzed these resources separately, but in practice they did not operate independently. In fact, they were a part of a tightly woven pedagogy that employed each aspect concurrently. For example, the community principles that were established created an environment where students felt free to be vulnerable about their feelings and identities, and that vulnerability in turn created relationships of understanding, trust, and reciprocity. Hence, the MDP class environment itself became a material resource that offered up new practices and characteristics like nurturing and shared responsibility as necessary tenants of black manhood. The Manhood Development environment was one in which students could try on new identities and practices and not feel as if their masculinity was compromised.

Our data do not allow us to speculate about how (and to what extent) students took up these new identities outside the MDP class. While we have some evidence from interviews and video data about how students talked about these new identities, we know little about how they have—or potentially will—take them up in other aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, this process of re-imagination that was encouraged in the classes may well extend beyond them, just as the stereotypes that penetrate into schools and classrooms in fact live within larger societal institutions and public ideologies.

It is important to note that there are also, however, some important cautions and tensions in this work. For example, many of the identity constellations derived through the class were consistent with dominant notions of the nuclear family, in which the boys as future fathers occupy the role of head of family, of provider, and so on. Further, while outright homophobic statements or jokes were not tolerated, a heteronormative idea of manhood was presented and/or presumed by some of the instructors. For example, discussions regarding relationships assumed a partner of the opposite sex, and instructors did not model or encourage gender-neutral terms. There were also moments where certain students may have felt isolated for not sharing interests or hobbies that were referenced (and presumed to be shared by the entire community), such as sports and hip-hop. These inherent tensions were present, and we shared many of these directly with the program and its instructors.

Implications

Our analysis of MDP demonstrates how districts can build on community resources to resist internalized oppression experienced by students. As such, our findings have important implications for districts and schools, as well as for teachers and others who work with African American adolescents. At the district and school levels, this study illustrates the possibility for supporting African American male students in new kinds of ways when there is a concerted effort to provide them with resources to better navigate the racism they encounter in school. The MDP in Oakland demonstrates the power of race and gender-specific instructional environments to support students in developing positive and transformative identities.

However, it also highlights some of the challenges with race and gender-specific initiatives. Here our concerns about gender equity echo recent sentiments regarding President Obama's *My Brother's Keeper* initiative. In many ways the black male educational crisis has come to dominate the discourse regarding African American education, which can marginalize the experiences of black female students. Those concerned with black

educational reform, on both policy and grassroots levels, must be careful not to conflate the crisis in black education to one that renders the challenges faced by young black women invisible. Targeted reform, such as MDP and *My Brothers Keeper*, can be positive and productive, but in considering the proliferation of race and gender specific programs, attention must be paid to ensuring said programs are not reproducing gender inequities.

This study also has implications for the work of teachers and others who work with African American youth. Specifically, given the saturation of society with problematic representations of black manhood through both interpersonal and institutional mediums, educators must recognize the complex identity terrain young black men must navigate. Hence, it is critical for educators to recognize the identity work, modeled by MDP instructors, as a crucial component of successful educational experiences for young black males.

Yet, if we contend that it is important and productive for teachers to engage in identity work with students, we must equip them with the skills to do so in the teacher training process. Teacher education programs must move beyond surface-level treatments of multicultural education and prepare instructors on best practices for successfully engaging black boys in positive identity construction. Informed by a historical legacy of assault on black male identities and grounded in a commitment to equity, this begets the need to reshape ideas around what it means to educate black boys. It requires teaching them in a manner that acknowledges their identities as black and male in a society that has always positioned them as a problem. Scholars and practitioners must, then, also consider how districts can provide current (often white and tenured) teachers with supplementary training and how to navigate teachers who either do not see identity building as a part of their job or do not feel comfortable engaging students in this way.

The final implication we will consider is a caution. When educational officials take up this identity work in the form of black male specific educational initiatives, African American boys and their families can be pathologized in the process. Black male students are often viewed as being culturally impoverished and in need of being cured or fixed. While the intention may be positive, if a program for black boys frames the problem as the child and/or his family, it ignores the institutional and structural racism operating within schools and society that are complicit in facilitating the production of identities rooted in stereotypical notions of black manhood.

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Notes

1. Oakland Unified has a history of addressing racial disparities in bold ways, including during the 1990s when a resolution was reached that legitimized African American Vernacular English (AAVE) commonly referred to as Ebonics. This act was hotly debated in the mainstream media and within the black community itself, but the OUSD believed the resolution would diminish the stigmatization of students whose primary language was AAVE and would also facilitate their learning of standard English.

2. This included three sites the first year (2010–2011) and five sites the second year (2011–2012).

3. In one site, the only middle school site, a focus group was conducted with students rather than one-on-one interviews.

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