

about Gender Identity Justice in Schools and Communities

reviewed by Christian Walkes

Title: about Gender Identity Justice in Schools and Communities

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As the premiere book in the Teachers College Press series *School : Questions*, sj Miller's *about Gender Identity Justice in Schools and Communities* is a robust compilation of practical and theoretical tools for institutional agents to learn about and engage in the quest for gender identity justice. Replete with statistical data, critical policy analysis, and counter-story, Miller authors a compelling portrait of why gender identity justice work is critical in schools. Simultaneously theoretical and practical in its approach, the structure of the book weaves between cutting-edge gender identity theory and its embodiment in educational contexts. Miller provides concrete examples of how students, teachers, administrators, school personnel, and, better yet, any equity minded individual can move along the continuum of gender identity awareness. Miller maintains that developing gender identity WOKENESS in the educational community is the nexus for gender identity justice in society writ large.

The first portion of the book offers a rich overview of why gender identity justice matters in the context of education and in the larger socio-political climate. Within the first few pages, readers are introduced to Emily, the *every* student, a stand-in figure for all gender identity complex students whose gender identity may be perceived as incongruous with historically conferred constructions of binaries, genders, and bodies (p. 12). For gender complex identities like Emily, schools are often a site of erasure whereby school policy, pedagogy, and structure privilege and reinforce cisnormativity. In schools, cisnormativity manifests in microaggressions, including but not limited to gender typical binaries in dress codes, sexual education courses, and bathrooms. These privileges may remain unrecognized by cisgender/cissexual bodies but, in aggregate, they can have a debilitating psycho-social-academic effect on gender complex identities. This primary section of the text relies upon (auto)ethnography, statistical data, and critical policy analysis to demonstrate how institutional agents produce, exacerbate, and alleviate gender identity inequity.

Chapter One directs attention to the shifting political climate and the retrenchment of the Federal Guidance to protect trans*⁺ and non-binary identifying students. Miller unabashedly points to the tumult precipitated by the current administration's decision to roll back the Obama-era Federal Guidance that covered the right to use a bathroom that matches an individual's gender identity, amongst other crucial protections for gender nonconforming identities. In schools, gender complex identities are more likely to feel unsafe and are more prone to discrimination and harassment from peers, teachers, and administrators than their cisgender/cissexual peers. As a result of the current administration's policy on gender identity complexity, many states lack enumerated anti-bullying and non-discrimination laws designed to protect LGBT individuals, leading to key legal challenges and changes in policy at the district and school levels. Feldman and Pentland's (2003) ostensive (idyllic routine of policy) versus performative (the policy routine as practiced) framework helps us examine the

interplay between variability and stability of policy. Consequently, despite written protections, many trans*⁺ and non-binary gender identities are subject to harassment. Chapter Three reveals how, through participation in micro-sanctuaries, students produce new gender literacies via disidentification and a refusal to fade to abjection (pp. 51–52). Miller centers micro-sanctuaries as under-tapped, asset-rich spaces to reimagine gender identity justice in school reform.

The second portion of the book addresses the *how* of gender identity justice. Chapter Four introduces the Gender Identity Complexities Framework (GICF), a set of principles alongside concrete examples of their application for approaching gender identity complexity in educational contexts. It is through the embodiment of its ten principles that one enters a state of gender identityWOKENESS. Gender identityWOKENESS is achieved when an individual has a nuanced understanding their gender identity, its ideological underpinnings, and its highly indeterminate nature. To account for the highly indeterminate nature of gender identity complexity, Miller uses trans*⁺, written with an asterisk and a superscript plus sign, to symbolize the infinite and ever-expanding ways of self-identifying. Grounded in a pedagogy of refusal, gender identityWOKE individuals embody the refusal to operate within historical and social constructions of being, similar in logic to a theory of trans*⁺. For the advancement of gender identityWOKENESS, Miller reimagines schools as micro-sanctuaries for the (re)invention of gender and gender identity literacy and language.

Absent in Miller's articulation of gender identity justice is a discussion of anti-Black structural racism. As outlined by Miller, gender identity is trans-sectional and trans-cultural; that is, gender identity is unfixed and given symbolic and material meaning by its indeterminate integration in multiple forms of identity and context (pp. 74–75). Through the lens of anti-Blackness, it is possible to capture the sleight of hand of gender identity justice policy and praxis for Black gender nonconforming bodies. Popular methods to secure trans*⁺ and non-binary gender protections such as anti-bullying and harassment laws rely upon the legal and carceral discourses of “perpetrator” and “victim,” whereby Black bodies are inherently criminal and fungible (Vaught, 2014, p. 158). Notions of “perpetrator” and “victim” nestled within the logics of anti-Blackness lead to the disproportionate punishment of Black bodies. Additionally, Miller's conceptualization of gender identityWOKENESS assumes that it is always easy and in one's best interest to divest from all historical constructions of being. This produces challenges when it comes to anti-Black violence as it precludes the difficulties of refusing and divesting Black identity while living in the ongoing continuities of slavery. With the added dimension of an anti-Black analysis, we can be sure to mitigate anti-Black violence in the struggle for gender identity justice.

References

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