


Chapter 5

Becoming Dr. Mac J: Queer Identity as Pedagogical Power

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines queer identity as a source of pedagogical power through an autoethnographic, practice-based lens grounded in arts-based education and teacher preparation. Centering the lived experience of a Black queer educator in higher education, the chapter explores how identity informs teaching, leadership, and community-building within contemporary educational spaces. Rather than positioning identity as a liability to be managed, the chapter argues that queer ways of knowing, such as relational awareness, adaptability, and embodied responsiveness, enhance pedagogical practice and student engagement. Drawing on reflective narrative and classroom practice, the chapter introduces Teach the Room, Not the Rules as a developing pedagogical framework that prioritizes facilitation, care, and human connection over control and compliance. The chapter concludes with implications for LGBTQIA+ educators, teacher preparation programs, and institutions seeking to support identity-informed pedagogy, cultivate belonging, and imagine more humane and liberatory futures in education.

INTRODUCTION – BECOMING DR. MAC J

Becoming Dr. Mac J is not simply the attainment of an academic title; it is an ongoing identity practice shaped by reflection, resilience, creativity, and joy. While the designation “Dr.” reflects years of rigorous study and the completion of mul-

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multiple degrees, none of which were easily earned, it does not define the totality of who I am or how I teach. Instead, Dr. Mac J represents a personal and pedagogical philosophy: *doing reflection, making a change, joyfully*. This philosophy guides how I move through education, leadership, and life, particularly within systems that often demand excellence without care or rest.

I begin with becoming because identity is not separate from pedagogy; it is the ground from which teaching, leadership, and learning emerge. How educators show up, what they carry, what they value, and what they notice, shape how relationships are built and how learning is facilitated (hooks, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2021). To become Dr. Mac J is to commit to reflective practice while choosing not to abandon joy, even while navigating sustained emotional, mental, physical, and financial labor. Joy, in this sense, is not avoidance or denial. It is an intentional way of remaining grounded, present, and human in work that can otherwise be exhausting.

My understanding of teaching was shaped long before I entered higher education. I was raised in Memphis, Tennessee, a city marked by Black history, cultural brilliance, movement, and survival. Long before classrooms became my professional spaces, I learned how bodies communicate, how rhythm carries memory, and how expression helps people endure. Dance and theatre were not extracurricular activities; they were formative spaces where I learned to be seen, where queerness could exist without apology, and where creativity provided language when words alone were not enough. These early experiences taught me that education is not solely cognitive; it is embodied, relational, and deeply human.

As a Black gay man, I learned early how to navigate spaces with heightened awareness. I learned how to read rooms, interpret energy, and recognize when spaces were safe, conditional, or unsafe altogether. These skills were never formally taught, yet they became essential tools for survival and later for teaching. Over time, I came to understand that these ways of knowing, often dismissed as intuition or sensitivity, were in fact pedagogical strengths. These relational and adaptive practices align with culturally sustaining and justice-centered pedagogies that value responsiveness, community, and lived experience as instructional assets (Paris & Alim, 2017). They continue to shape how I connect with students, facilitate learning, and cultivate classroom communities grounded in trust and belonging.

Becoming Dr. Mac J reflects my commitment to teaching honestly and fully, without separating who I am from how I teach. Within higher education, particularly in predominantly white institutions and politically conservative contexts, educators who exist at the intersection of Blackness and queerness are often expected to soften, mute, or compartmentalize parts of themselves in the name of professionalism or comfort. This chapter pushes back against that expectation by asserting that queer identity is not a problem to manage in education; it is a source of pedagogical strength.

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