

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas

June 17, 2026

ISSN 1094-5296

Gross, N. (2023). *Brothers in grief: The hidden toll of gun violence on Black boys and their schools*. University of Chicago Press.

288 pp.

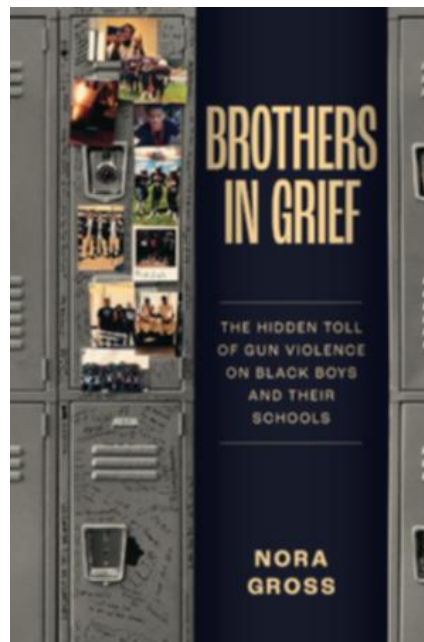
ISBN: 9780226827582

Reviewed by Juliett Frazer-Sadaar
University of Texas El Paso
United States

Nora Gross is a sociologist of education, ethnographer and documentary filmmaker whose research focuses on youth, race, gender, grief and schooling, particularly in contexts shaped by violence and inequality. She is an assistant professor of education at Barnard College, utilizing participatory and visual research methods in ethnography.

Gross's book, *Brothers in Grief: The Hidden Toll of Gun Violence on Black Boys and Their Schools* is a poignant, timely and insightful ethnographic account of how Black adolescent boys reconcile the emotional trauma of losing friends and peers to gun violence and how schools often seem ill-equipped or misunderstand the depth of that grief, especially when boys are affected. This work is an interesting intersection of sociology, education, and youth studies. In it, Gross portrays grief as a critical yet unexplored dimension of Black boys' educational experiences.

This research also challenges the present belief that during grief, "normalcy" depicting discipline and achievement should still dominate the daily school discourse and activities. One memorable quote related to this insight is "Facing pressure from multiple directions, administrators, teachers and disciplinarians, prioritize the school's college preparatory mission leading to the neglect of some students' unresolved grief" (p. 25). An overemphasis on discipline and academic performance during times of trauma negatively affects the boys' relationships, academic motivation, and coping skills. This theme pervades the book. Observing closely and conversing with staff and students, Gross concludes that



grief is not just a social issue but also an educational one. The Philadelphia state senator, speaking at Boys' School's memorial assembly, reminded the boys "JahSun's death was not an isolated incident, but connected to bigger structural issues and the social conditions they all face." *Brothers in Grief* therefore urges stakeholders in education to review policies and practices addressing the issue of grief to meet the emotional needs of their vulnerable students.

Gross's ethnography focuses on Boys' Prep, a boys' charter school in Philadelphia that caters solely to low-income Black boys. This is an elite school that prides itself on preparing them for college. Gross highlights the significant yet often ignored fact that Black boys in the United States are disproportionately affected by the violent deaths of peers, friends, and family members. "Philadelphia is said to have 36,000 "missing Black men" due to early death or incarceration. It is notable that Gross is at pains to explain that she uses the word *boy* to avoid the trap of adultification and to remind us constantly that it is not *normal* for *children* to die or for the children to grieve each other. (p. 26). Hence, when JahSun, a very popular athlete and academically promising 18-year-old, is killed in gun violence during Thanksgiving, the boys could not come to terms with his death. Gross therefore notes that their grief is rarely acknowledged or supported within school systems, where administrators and teachers often fail to grasp the intensity of the trauma created by multiple violent deaths. Gross argues that this "hidden toll" is not only emotional but educational, shaping boys' academic trajectories, disciplinary encounters, and relationships with adults.

The book is important not only for its exploration of grief and trauma but also for its highlighting of gun violence as both a public health and an educational justice issue. Gross's work shows that quite often, especially among Black boys, grief is ongoing trauma, a chronic condition for many Black boys. In the span of two years, three boys had died tragically at Boys' Prep. Tyhir had been shot a year earlier, and they lost Bill that spring, in what Gross described as "grief layered on top of grief" (p. 3). Some boys had transferred after Tyhir's death. Yet schools rarely structure their curriculum or routines to accommodate ongoing grief in tandem with ongoing violence. Gross notes that institutional neglect is compounded by cultural beliefs that boys, especially Black boys, are inherently resilient and should process grief privately and quickly. Her research counters this assumption by documenting the traumatic effects of gun violence on the youth of Boys' Prep. Gross contends that compared to trauma, grief remains relatively neglected in our population (p. 23). She challenges deficit narratives that pathologize Black youth and instead emphasizes the artifacts that the boys utilize to cope with their overwhelming grief, stating that attention must be paid. Gross focuses on JahSun, a student she knew personally and whose death profoundly affected her. His mother had consented to his participation in the study, and his loss becomes both a tribute and a lens through which Gross examines the psychological toll of gun violence on Black boys. She makes a powerful statement about the school's ineptitude when she states, "...if the adults at school couldn't fully recognize the depths of the students' grief, how could they prepare them for their promised futures" (p. 24).



The book unfolds across seven major thematic sections corresponding to institutional responses to JahSun's death and others that occurred during Gross's time at the school. These deaths highlight the epidemic of gun violence and the communal rupture it produces. The school remains largely unaware of how violence outside its walls reshapes its internal world, pushing instead for a rapid return to academic routines. In this section, she documents the school's attempts to provide short-term counseling and symbolic support. However, even the fonts in titles capture the lack of cohesiveness and consistency in the effort. They depict a mixture of capital and common letters with the "hard hard" invariably in common letters, signifying their lack of importance. The inconsistency signals that the school's efforts are insufficient and Gross provides snapshots of grief as the boys seek solace in more therapeutic forms of consolation, such as talking, (even though they avoid naming JahSun) listening to music, wearing sentimental keepsakes of JahSun, expressing sorrow on social media and leaning on peer support in the school's corridors. JahSun's biological brother, Bashir, could not remain home because his father was processing grief negatively and the school provided little relief. This idea is what Gross captures in the title. When students request more time away from normal routines, administrators respond punitively, prioritizing institutional goals of achievement and discipline over emotional needs. Gross depicts this period as "Policing Grief the hard hard" (p.67).

The "hard hard" is academic pressure intensified. Teachers and administrators push for "normalcy," believing that education is the boys' "ticket" out of poverty and violence. Yet this push for normalcy denies the psychological support necessary for that very success. The chapter, "Disenfranchised Grief the hidden hard" reveals the boys' private grief, because of cultural myopia that creates subterranean grief and long-term emotional challenges. The boys develop their own "invisible" support systems, hidden from adults who continue to uphold myths of Black male stoicism and resilience. The Philadelphia state senator hints at this resilience when he encourages the boys at the "honoring" of JahSun to deal with whatever anger they felt in ways that the country does not expect (p. 47). For the time that day Gross states that an adult had publicly connected JahSun's death to larger patterns of racialized violence and oppression.

This book is an invaluable resource for educators and school leaders seeking effective trauma responsive pedagogy. It is also recommended as an insightful study for researchers in sociology, education, psychology, youth studies, and policymakers. Its concerns about school climate, safety, and equity should be of interest to community organizations working with youth affected by violence and graduate students interested in the topic of advocacy.

Gross's research utilizes a multiyear ethnographic study combining participant observation, in-depth interviews with students and teachers, fieldnotes documenting school rituals and memorials, and visual and narrative methods informed by her filmmaking background. This includes their ongoing Instagram posts:

today gonna be hard as shit but ima make it through
for you ¹⁰⁰nbs i miss you like crazy. it's driving me

insane. i just wanna wake up from this nightmare  i
told you ima come talk to you everyday and tell you
how life going ¹⁰⁰ i love you bro . (p. 11)

Gross's repeated encounter with the same students enhances our understanding of grief as a lived, ongoing process that is made even more difficult if not treated effectively.

A distinct contribution is her identification of artifacts such as music, memorial T-shirts, and rituals as evidence of grief therapy. Among the "brothers" who mourn JahSun, these forms of portable memorabilia, playlists, shared songs, and lyrical references function as tools for the management of trauma while simultaneously Gross reveals that grief for Black boys is communal and contextual, a lived experience of culture that interviews cannot capture sufficiently. The research design of ethnography effectively captures the rich description of Black boys' grief while emphasizing to policymakers and administrators that one size does not fit all.

There are other authors who have focused on grief. For example, Freeden Blume Oeur's *Black Boys Apart* (2018), explores racial uplift and respectability politics in all male schools; however, Gross offers a more nuanced ethnography by highlighting grief as a daily lived experience. Juliet Hooker's *Black Grief/White Grievance* (2023) discusses racialized grief at the macropolitical level, while Gross's school-based ethnography provides a localized, youth-centered ethnography portraying school routines as suppressing emotional expression. Similarly, Natasha Warikoo's *Race at the Top* (2022) analyzes racial dynamics in suburban schools, yet Gross's work stands apart by documenting the compounded trauma of repeated peer deaths and the discordance between academic expectations and emotional needs. Gross's conceptualization of the "EASY HARD," "HARD HARD" and "HIDDEN HARD" stages of school response is a unique contribution absent in other authors' portrayals of grief.

A significant strength of the book is its organization around recurring scenes, classrooms, memorials, hallways, and thematic chapters that track grief work, brotherhood, and institutional response. Each scene is followed by an analytic reflection linking grief action to policy and theory. It is a structured argument that moves from lived practice to institutional critique. Gross's attention to positionality, building trust and representation, adds credibility to her interpretations. Her deeply relational approach allows her to trace how grief accumulates and how coping strategies shift over time.

Overall, the book is illuminating and transformative; however, there is a weakness. The single site focus provides depth but cannot be generalized to regions, school types, or age groups. Although Gross acknowledges this, it would be useful for readers to compare cases across cities or schools. Nevertheless, the depth of the Philadelphia case offers insights that can spark conversations about grief, violence, and schooling.

Brothers in Grief is an important contribution to educational discourse, offering a nuanced exploration of how chronic loss shapes Black boys' schooling

experiences. Gross emphasizes gun violence as an educational equity issue that demands institutional review rather than individual resilience. For researchers, the book demonstrates how ethnography can reveal nuances that quantitative studies often miss. For educators and policymakers, it offers a timely reminder that academic success cannot be separated from emotional wellbeing. Gross's work challenges schools to recognize grief not as a disruption to learning but as an adjustment disorder shaping the lives of many students and to respond with care, flexibility, and humanity.

References

- Blume Oeur, F. (2018). *Black boys apart: Racial uplift and respectability in all-male public schools*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Hooker, J. (2023). *Black grief/white grievance: The politics of loss*. Princeton University Press.
- Warikoo, N. (2022). *Race at the top: Asian Americans and whites in pursuit of the American dream in suburban schools*. University of Chicago Press.

About the Reviewer

Juliett A. Frazer-Sadaar is a PhD candidate in the Teaching, Learning and Culture program at the University of Texas at El Paso. Her studies focus on justice-oriented education, with particular attention to the literacy and schooling experiences of boys in Caribbean and transnational contexts. Her work is informed by critical pedagogy, culturally sustaining pedagogy, and justice-focused theoretical frameworks. Prior to her doctoral studies, Frazer-Sadaar held senior leadership roles in Jamaican secondary education, including service as a high school principal. Her current research includes archival and historical analyses of educational governance, in addition to contemporary qualitative studies, examining teachers' perspectives on and adaptation of computer science resources in K-12 schools and culturally sustaining pedagogical design for boys.



About the Book Author

Nora Gross is an assistant professor of education at Barnard College, Columbia University, as well as a sociologist of education, an ethnographer, and a documentary filmmaker. Her research explores the intersection of race, gender, and class for youth in school and community contexts and asks how young people develop and protect their inner lives in the face of considerable external constraints. Prior to coming to Barnard in 2023, Gross was a Core Fellow/visiting assistant professor of



sociology at Boston College, where she worked on interdisciplinary teaching teams in the freshman core curriculum. She received her PhD in 2020 from the University of Pennsylvania in sociology and education, and an MA in sociology of education from NYU.

Education Review

Reseñas Educativas



Resenhas Educativas



Education Review / Reseñas Educativas / Resenhas Educativas is edited by Gene V Glass (English), Gustavo E. Fischman (Spanish/Portuguese), and Stephanie McBride-Schreiner

(Managing Editor) and supported by the Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, Arizona State University. Copyright is retained by the first or sole author, who grants right of first publication to the *Education Review*. Readers are free to copy, display, distribute, and adapt this article, if the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Education Review*, the changes are identified, and the same license applies to the derivative work. More details of this Creative Commons license are available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>.

Education Review is free-to-read and free-to-publish.



Disclaimer: The views or opinions presented in book reviews are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of *Education Review*.