

(In)Visibility Across Educational Spaces: Centering Mental Health & Wellness for Black Girls & Women

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Introduction

This thematic issue, *(In)Visibility Across Educational Spaces: Centering Mental Health & Wellness for Black Girls & Women*, reflects a collection of recent scholarship centering the experiences of Black girls and women across the educational pipeline. Notably, the scholarship represented uniquely focuses on the influence of mental health and wellness on their educational success and academic outcomes. This collection of articles serves as a resource for individuals (i.e., teachers/professors, administrators, counselors, and psychologists) working in educational environments who seek to increase their awareness of the mental health issues Black girls/women face and to identify innovative ways to address these concerns in their professional roles. Although limited, scholarship exploring the academic needs (Ford et al., 2019; Patton & Croom, 2017; Young et al., 2017), career concerns (Boss et al., 2021; Mayes & Hines, 2014), and social conditions (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016) has grown over the past few decades. Specifically, research examining the impact of social conditions on identity development (Jacobs, 2016; Porter et al., 2020), gendered racism (Lewis et al., 2017), and adultification (Epstein et al., 2017; Morris, 2016) continues to deepen our understanding of Black girls/women and their experience, but little scholarship explores the mental health ramifications of these conditions (Byrd & Porter, 2022; Evans-Winters, 2005; Jones & Guy-Sheftall, 2015; Szymanski & Lewis, 2016).

Historically, the mental health needs of Black girls and women have been overlooked and minimized. Even within discussions of historical moments in education, such as school integration, stories about Ruby Bridges and Elizabeth Eckford often focus on their strength and courage, but rarely the psychological ramifications of the gendered racism they faced. This dehumanization continues today when considering the stories of two girls who died by suicide after repeated racialized bullying, 11-year-old Celina Okwuone in 2010 (Laforgia, 2012) and 10-year-old Isabella “Izzy” Tichenor in 2021 (Joseph, 2021). Celina, a 5th grade student in Florida, documented her bullying in a diary which was evaluated by the police after she died by suicide. The night Celina died, students sent hateful messages mocking her weight and calling her names like ‘ugly, blacky, and b---h.’ The police investigated Okwuone’s text messages and diary and determined that there was no crime against Okwuone (Laforgia, 2010). Izzy’s, a Black and autistic student in Utah, was also repeatedly bullied, and her parents reported these occurrences to the school district. Unfortunately, the school ignored and, in some instances, did not report the incidents. As a result, an independent investigation concluded there was ‘no direct evidence’ of racialized bullying. While Celina and Izzy are only two cases, they represent many that have been covered by local media and others that have not been reported. For both, the school district, school building, and later law enforcement failed them. Like many Black girls, they reside at the intersection of their race and gender. Therefore the violence inflicted upon them is rendered invisible (i.e., feelings/humanity ignored), but hypervisible (i.e., surveilled, corrected, and policed) (Crenshaw, 1989; Morris, 2016). Therefore, the challenges Black girls and women encounter throughout their educational trajectories are complex, can disrupt their academic potential and success, and can negatively impact their mental health across the lifespan (Byrd & Porter, 2022; Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Patton, 2022; Porter & Byrd, 2021b).

Black undergraduate women, teachers, faculty, and administrators alike encounter a host of controlling images that void them of individuality, autonomy, and shape how others interact with them (Collins, 1990; Patton & Njoku, 2019; Porter & Byrd, 2021a). Controlling images, such as the strong Black woman or superwoman archetypes, exacerbate a historical legacy of gendered racism wherein Black women must navigate whether to combat or perpetuate their historical situatedness in society (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009; Wallace, 1979). In other words, Black girls and women must endure other people’s perceptions (and enactment) of who they are and should be within their respective educational spaces, often at the detriment of their mental health and well-being. Black feminism and critical scholars continue to provide language to describe the conditions influencing this phenomenon. Notably, intersectionality provides the lens to make-meaning of the peculiar manifestations of gendered racism across Black girls’ and women’s lifespans.

Intersectionality

Intersectionality, a term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a lens and foundation to astutely examine the unique ways the entwined nature of race, gender, class, and other minoritized identities influence the experiences of Black girls and women across all facets of life. Crenshaw (1989) situates intersectionality as an inherent challenge to the notion

that race and gender are exclusive of one another and noted the concerns within the legal world when examining the oppression faced by Black women. She argues to solely focus on race or gender as the reference point for discrimination “creates a distorted analysis of racism and sexism because the operative conceptions of race and sex become grounded in experiences that actually represent only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140).

Intersectionality supports an understanding outside of the legal world as well to include educational settings (Harris & Patton, 2019; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), counseling (Byrd, 2021; Ali & Lee, 2019), and psychology (Shin et al., 2017). In education, our understanding of oppression through the lens of intersectionality gives life to other concepts that permits us to specifically name the origin and characteristics of violence. For example, Black women scholars have expanded upon a term from social science, adultification (Minuchin et al., 1998), to shed light on the experiences of Black girls in K-12 settings. Epstein, Blake, and Gonzalez (2017) shared that adultification is a stereotype “rooted in the legacy of racial discrimination in this country, which historically included responding to Black youths’ child-like behavior more punitively” (p. 4). They further asserted adultification “effectively reduces or removes the consideration of childhood as a mediating factor in Black youths’ behavior” (p. 2). When compared to White girls of the same age in the study, participants perceived Black girls to need less nurturing, protection, comforting, and to know more about sex (Epstein et al., 2017). The perception they need less directly impacts others' responses to their mental health concerns. This means the symptoms helping professionals are trained to understand as manifestations of psychological distress are ignored (i.e., they are making it up) or criminalized (i.e., they are old enough to know better). Additionally, Black girls, like all Black people, can face misdiagnoses or ‘normal’, and developmentally appropriate responses are pathologized (Ashley, 2014; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012). Although adultification is a concept used to describe a specific childhood phenomenon, Black women continue to face these stereotypes and images across their lifetimes.

Looking Forward

Over the past few decades, scholarship has increased across helping professions to focus on awareness of mental health challenges and illuminate culturally responsive and therapeutic approaches to better support Black girls and women (Handy et al., 2022; Harper et al., 2016; Jones, 2009; Jones, 2021). Scholars, clinicians, and practitioners have conducted empirical explorations grounded within critical methodologies and frameworks that have significantly contributed to literature canons (i.e., psychology, counseling, and education). This thematic issue serves as a coming together of empirical and conceptual articles, a compilation of scholarship wherein Black girls’ and women’s experiences are centered and uplifted, and their ways of knowing and being made visible by Black women across educational spaces.

Overview of Thematic Issue

The seven articles in this thematic issue extend the scholarship focused on the mental health and wellness of Black girls and women. This themed issue aims to increase awareness of

mental health struggles, identify theoretical lenses through which to glean deeper understanding, and center strengths-based therapeutic approaches to support healing and development. Contributing authors unapologetically (1) describe how and the extent to which Black girls and women experience marginalization and erasure concerning their mental health and wellness, and (2) uplift unique and intersectional strategies to disrupt gendered racism perpetuated by practices and policies within educational spaces.

The thematic issue begins with *The Ford Female Achievement Model for Excellence (F2AME): Empowering Black Females for Success* (Middleton & Ford, 2022). Middleton and Ford utilize the F2AME model to explore the academic climate and socioemotional adversities faced by Black girls/women enrolled in two predominantly White environments and to generate solutions to the problems encountered. The next article is titled, *Grieving Black Girlhoods: Black Memory Work in Current and (Re)membered Geographies of Black Girls Who've Experienced Loss* (Brown, 2022). Brown (2022) explores the experiences of Black girls healing from various forms of grief and loss. The grief journeys of Black girls and women are limited in academic scholarship and frequently ignored in practice, rendering their pain and potential for healing invisible. Authors of the third article, *What Serves You?": Charting Black Girl Spaces for Wellness through Spirituality, Resistance, and Homeplace* (Inniss-Thompson et al., 2022), utilize photovoice to explore spaces, people, and visualizations Black girls associated with positive mental health and wellness. While the use of photovoice to glean insight into a phenomenon within academic scholarship is growing, its use as a therapeutic tool is less explored. The fourth article, *The 'Strong Black Girl' Dilemma: Reflections on Young Black Women's Mental Health during Dual Pandemics* (Ncube et al., 2022), examines the gendered effects of the dual pandemics (Covid-19 and racial violence) on undergraduate Black women. The fifth article, *Grown Black Woman Voice: A Framework for Resistance, Persistence, and Existence in Academic Spaces and Beyond* (Johnson, 2022), introduces a model, Grown Black Woman Voice (GBWV), to support Black women's confidence when actively resisting dominant narratives (i.e., stereotypes). Notably, GBWV (Johnson, 2022) centers Black feminism (Collins, 2000) and highlights the necessity for Black women to engage in care while advocating for themselves and others. The sixth article, *Beyond Bothered: Exploring Identity, Stressors, and Challenges of Black Women Ivy Collegians* (Hardaway et al., 2022), examines the perceptions of race, gender, and ethnicity of six Black women studying in Ivy League institutional environments. The final article, *Black Women Acting Against the Extremes of Visibility in the Academy* (Roberts et al., 2022), combines the theoretical and methodological tenets of sister circle focus groups (Neal-Barnett et al., 2011) and *Theatre of the Oppressed* (Boal, 2002) to examine how five Black women faculty responded to gendered racism (i.e., microaggressions and stereotypes) and the healing process after incidents.

Implications

Historically, little value has been placed on the mental well-being of Black girls and women (Combahee River Collective, 1983). The body of scholarship represented in this thematic issue connects to the growing tapestry of work Black women scholars have created to increase

awareness of and solutions to our social, emotional, and other mental health concerns. Contributing authors made visible the experiences of Black girls and women in this issue; we employ scholars, clinicians, and practitioners to do the same. Perpetuating Black girls' and women's invisibility has grave implications - refusing to center Black girls and women is literally a matter of life and death. We hope this thematic issue increases awareness, encourages the production of new scholarship, and provides guidance to practitioners working with and on behalf of Black girls and women. More importantly, however, we hope this collection of articles revealed both critical realities and possibilities of what can be when we actually see Black girls and women for who they are and what they can be.

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