

Black Girls Youth Participatory Action Research & Pedagogies

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Introduction to the Thematic Issue

More than a decade ago, as a group of anti-racist and feminist researchers, including one of the authors, set out to survey the landscape of the schooling experiences of Black girls, we encountered a pronounced *knowledge desert* that threatened research-informed policy interventions that served to protect Black girls. Most research at the time focused on the educational experiences of male, female, or Black students. There was hardly any readily available data on the school-based outcomes of Black girls as a specific group of students with a unique set of experiences. In *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, & Underprotected* (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015), qualitative and quantitative research methods were utilized to examine the lived experiences of Black girls and other girls of color. Scholars and activists across disciplinary fields conducted in-depth interviews, surveys, focus groups, and town hall meetings to better comprehend Black girls' lived realities. The Black Girls Matter (BGM) report served as an intervention that filled a knowledge gap, and it brought to light the unique experiences that Black girls and other girls of color experienced in their quest to seek a free and appropriate education.

From our vantage point, the “knowledge desert” (p. 6) declaration in the BGM report (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015) also initiated a collective call-and-response from an often silenced research community because of its intentional and unwavering focus on intersectionality as a tool of analysis and praxis. Many of us Black women scholars viewed the declaration as justification to pursue our intellectual interests in understanding how Black girls and other girls of color experience the social world and navigate their families, communities, and schools in raced and gendered bodies. Many scholars responded to the call for more research by not only developing

more research focused on Black girls, but many of us went further in our theoretical and empirical pursuits; we also began publicly questioning *how* research was conducted with Black girls, which, from an intersectional perspective, is equally as important in our search for gender and racial equity.

In other words, critical scholars interested in examining Black girls' multiple realities, have also begun to critique the *how* of research. Stated differently, anti-racist and feminist scholars began to ponder with more urgency "How do we know what we know about Black girls?" Methodologically speaking, "how" questions are concerned with processes of knowledge acquisition or scientific inquiry. In our strivings to hydrate the knowledge desert, we asked questions such as: What are the current discussions taking place about the state of Black girls' education or development in general, and how have researchers discussed Black girls in the literature? What types of research questions are being raised about Black girls? How does structural power impact the daily experiences of Black girls in their social contexts? How do scientific racism and implicit bias enter research conversations about Black girls? How do research and so-called scientific knowledge further do harm to Black girls?

What we discovered in our attempts to better understand the state of research on Black girls is that historically much of the research on Black girls and young women is enveloped in frameworks and discourse of pathology and deficiency; and in contemporary times too often the lived experiences of Black girls are theorized through the worldviews of adult women. Very few studies considered the unique socioemotional and developmental needs of research participants living at the intersections of race and gender. And even fewer studies tend to center the voices of Black girls in the research process, and instead, prefer quantitative data collection methods that utilize survey instruments to collect data from all adolescents, Black adolescents, or all girls; and then, generalize respondents' responses across student groups.

Consequently, in a world that privileges maleness and whiteness, Black girls' experiences will be whited-out by the experiences of white girls and erased by the experiences of their Black male peers. In many graduate students' academic preparations, they are rarely socialized to value the experiences of Black girls and young women. Nor are many taught how to center race and gender in scientific inquiry. The Black Girls Matter Report illustrated for those of us committed to youth advocacy and Black girls' positive development and safety how to center Black girls and other girls of color in our research pursuits while acknowledging Black girls' agency.

Since 2015, in the face of the dual pandemics of Covid-19 and a racial reckoning, anti-racist and feminist scholars have openly questioned the presumed innocence of science and called for the *decolonization of research*. A new generation of scholars are turning toward Critical Race Theory, Indigenous methodologies, community-based research, and youth-led research as intentional interruptions to implicit racial and gender bias as well as to counter the exploitative nature of institutional research and other forms of systemic power.

With these epistemological and methodological turns in mind, we can now seek to better understand and grapple with the possibilities of intersectionality as a tool of praxis in Black girlhood studies. More specifically, in this thematic issue, scholars responded to our call for

manuscripts that centered Black girls as participants, researchers, and interpreters of data. Historically, girlhood studies have been “grounded in Eurocentric Western White middle-class understandings of what it means to be a girl and woman in a white male patriarchal society” (Evans-Winters & Girls for Gender Equity, 2017:1). Research irradiating the specificity of Black girlhood and Black girls’ lived experiences within and beyond K-12 schooling institutions is burgeoning (see Brown, 2013; Cox, 2015; Morris, 2016, 2017; 2019; Smith, 2019). Studies that have centered Black girls in their discussions have influenced how we think about discipline, curriculum, local and state policies.

Although community-engaged scholars have theorized and implemented youth-engaged research (i.e., YPAR) in various formats (e.g., theater, spoken word, art education, etc.), Black girls’ participation in research as partners and collaborators is rarely discussed or theorized. In this thematic issue of JAAGWE, scholars interrogate the teaching of research to and with Black girls by positioning them as inquirers, seekers of knowledge, theoreticians, data collectors, and presenters of research. Authors were asked to consider the following questions in their manuscript submissions:

- What constitutes Black girl research pedagogies and how is it (or is it not) an articulation of YPAR?
- What does the study of YPAR look like from an intersectional perspective?
- How do Black girls and young Black women participate meaningfully in research that documents their efforts for social change, intersectional justice, and liberation?
- In what ways are Black girls' nuanced and intersecting identities situated within and constructed by the research context?
- What are the possibilities of Black girl pedagogies in facilitating Black girls’ activism, agency, and creativity/ingenuity in responding to gendered, racialized, and classed inequalities in society?
- What does it mean to produce culturally responsive research with and alongside Black girls?
- How do we involve Black girls in the evaluation of programming and policy initiatives?

Collectively, the articles presented here conceptualize Black girl youth participatory research as a culturally congruent methodological approach grounded in Black Feminist praxis and as a tool for facilitating Black girls’ research literacy. Authors attempt to disrupt the traditional exploitative, voyeuristic, unidirectional nature of academic research that too often conduct research “on” Black girls which positions them as mere ‘objects’ of study.

In juxtaposition, in this thematic issue, we intentionally highlight viable methods of conducting research *with* Black girls that honor them as co-producers, collaborators, and full participants in the research process (Evans-Winters, 2019). Altogether, the collection of articles raises important questions about the ethical concerns of youth-informed, youth-led, youth-engaged, and or youth participatory action research.

We believe that intersectionality as a tool of analysis and praxis can serve as a mitigating factor between erasure and data gaps. Intersectionality as praxis opens up opportunities to explore issues of race, gender, and youth development in a racist and sexist society. Intersectionality situates not only race and gender in research discourse and practices, but also concerns itself with issues of power and social groups juxtaposition to structural power.

For example, how do structural forces like racism and sexism shape the school experiences of Black school girls? How does the over policing of working class and predominantly Black neighborhoods influence Black girls' contact with the police or the criminal justice system? How does lack of access to affordable housing in racially segregated Black neighborhoods threaten Black girls' feelings of physical safety and security? In the call for this thematic issue, for instance, authors were invited to discuss a wide range of topics such as Black girls' geographies and migrations, the policing of gender and sexuality in school settings, Black girl pedagogies, Black girls in STEM, digital media and social technology use amongst Black girls, reproductive justice, health and wellness, etc. Intersectional youth participatory action research, centers discussions of power alongside the voices of Black girls while simultaneously providing opportunities for Black girls themselves to raise important research questions that are relevant to their families, peer groups, neighborhoods, schools and workplaces, and other social contexts.

Even more importantly, as the editors of this thematic issue we suggest that YPAR, through an intersectional lens serves to: (1) teach Black girls how to utilize anti-racist and feminist critical theory (e.g., Black feminist, Critical Race Theory, intersectionality, etc.) to examine their social relationships and environments, (2) how to use tools of research to document their lived realities, and (3) how to use empirical evidence to shape policy and social change. Further, as evidenced by the articles presented in this thematic issue, we are beginning to better understand how intersectionality is a useful Black girl-affirming lens for analyzing how the research process is shaped by and situated in specific geographical, socio-cultural contexts, and intersecting identities (Esposito et al., 2018).

With the intent of centering youth citizenship and critical inquiry in educational contexts, we invite readers to contemplate intersectional youth participatory action research (IYPAR) as a theoretical and pedagogical tool for raising youth leaders' critical race and gender consciousness. What would the social world look like if Black girls, young women, and gender expansive youth became researchers and historians of their own lives for the purposes of shaping policy and helping all citizens realize a multiracial democracy? We express our fullest gratitude to the scholars presented in this thematic issue who took up the charge to research with and alongside Black girls.

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