Towards a Radical Healing Praxis for Black Girls: Imagining Learning Environments That Foster the Sociopolitical Learning of Adolescent Black Girls

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Abstract: In education research and practice, there is a lack of attention paid to the unique racialized gendered needs and experiences of Black girls. This conceptual paper, a work in progress, utilizes the radical healing model (Ginwright, 2010) to (re)frame (Hand, Penual, Gutiérrez, 2012) and reimagine learning environments that not only eradicate but also redress the harm that stems from the structural and symbolic violence imbedded in the formal educational experience many US Black girls endure. A tailored Radical Healing Praxis provides an ecologically responsive pedogeological framework from which researchers and practitioners can begin the work of developing learning environments that lead to the healing and healthy sociopolitical development of Black girl learners.

Keywords: Black girls, Radical Healing Model, (Re)frame, Race

Introduction

With approximately eight million Black students participating in the U.S. educational system (Aud, 2013), 52% of them are girls, however, the scholarly trends regarding Black education continue to focus extensively on Black males. Statistics about the state of Black education largely ignore the unique experiences, performance, and outcomes of Black girls (Morris, 2015; Cooper 2015; Rollock, 2007 as cited in Ricks, 2014). Although attention to Black boys is warranted given their lower attendance and graduation rates, higher representation in segregated special education classrooms, lower levels of gainful employment, and high involvement in the criminal justice system (Ferguson, 2001; Greene & Winters, 2006; Holzman, 2004; Polite & Davis, 1999), this scholarly attention should not be undertaken at the expense of a critical look at the challenges confronting Black girls who are educated in the same woefully inadequate contexts as their male counterparts.

Although Black girls, like Black boys, are experiencing similar marginalization, structural oppression, and unfriendly learning environments, with few exceptions (Cooper, 2015; Crenshaw 2015; Evans-Winters, 2005; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Fordham, 1993; Morris 2016; Richardson, 2013; Ricks, 2014) there is widespread neglect on the part of education researchers to examine and conceptualize the integrated issues of race and gender that impact the learning experience of Black girls (Boston & Baxley, 2007; Mirza, 2009; Pinder, 2008 as cited in Ricks, 2014). "Instead, when researchers examine marginalized groups in education, the focus is almost exclusively on Black males and White females, with little attention devoted to the unique experiences and needs of Black females" (Ricks, 2014). Furthermore, the challenges that Black girls face in schools, for example, regarding suspensions, expulsions, and other disciplinary practices often go underreported therefore "leading to the incorrect inference that their futures are not also at risk. This assumption obscures the fact that all too often [Black] girls are struggling in the shadows of public concern" (Crenshaw, 2015, p.17). In the absence of specific attention on the unique educational needs and experiences of Black girls, they continue to fall through the cracks of our attention and our praxis.

I enter this work as a Black woman researcher, who as an adolescent, personally experienced chilly and untailored formal learning environments. After university, I entered the field as a practitioner, where I worked in a variety of capacities, from teacher to school leader. Despite my institutional position, I observed schools inflicting harm on Black girls through culturally isolating pedagogies, harsher discipline practices, and regular assaults against their personhood. The results of this structural and symbolic violence, are that Black girls are suspended at greater rates to white girls *and* at greater proportional rates than Black boys when compared to white boys (Crenshaw, 2015). Black girls fall victim to the school-to-prison pipeline and compose the fastest growing segment of America's juvenile justice system (Black Woman's Roundtable, 2014). Black women outnumber any other racial group of women in federal or state prisons (The Sentencing Project, 2015). Black girls continue to be on the losing end of the achievement and opportunity gap (Carter & Welner, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Darling-Hammond, 2007). Furthermore, they experience disturbing rates of poverty, confront higher health risks, experience adequate reproductive rights policies, and are isolated when subjected to violence (Romany, 2000). For those Black girls and women who can overcome the interlocking gendered racism of their primary and secondary school experiences, and are able to enter the academy as undergraduate or graduate

students, they too continue to experience the violence associated with harmful educational praxis at the university level (Fordham, 1993), sometimes resulting in alarming rates of depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, thoughts of suicide, bulimia, and/or drug addiction (Croom, 2012; hooks, 2005). Although Black girls have deftly created and/or adopted a toolbox of skillful coping and defense mechanisms (such as gender passing, getting loud, or bringing "wreck") to deal with the gendered racism they experience in schools (Richardson, 2013; Fordham, 1993; Pough, 2004; Williams, 1988), these coping defense mechanisms obscure the dire condition of their educational experiences and are often misinterpreted by teachers and school personnel as personality and/or cultural characteristics instead of responses to living with daily microaggressions (Ricks, 2014). Black girls are negotiating the significant gaps in their educational experience, largely by themselves, because the gaps are not being adequately attended to by practitioners and researchers. It is incumbent upon practitioners and researchers to assume responsibility for addressing the gaps created by inadequate design, harmful practice, and under theorizing of the Black girl educational experience.

Researchers and practitioners must begin thinking critically about how to better design learning environments that not only minimize the harm that Black girls experience in schools but also leads to the healing and healthy sociopolitical development of Black girl learners. This paper outlines research (in process) on utilizing a Radical Healing Praxis (Ginwright, 2010) framework to (re)frame traditionally oppressive learning environments (Hand, Penual, Gutiérrez, 2012) in ways that mitigate harm and maximize the educational experience and life trajectory of this neglected demographic.

Significance

One hallmark of the learning sciences field, is our commitment to researching and designing educational environments that work for learners. However, only approximately 15% of learning scientist conduct research on learning related to race, approximately 13% focus on learning impacted by gender, and an uncounted smaller fraction focuses on the intersections of learning, race, and gender (Yoon, 2017). Although learning scientists aim to understand and theorize learning in a diversity of contexts, not enough learning scientist are taking up research on learning that happens at the intersection of race, gender, and oppression (Yoon, 2017b), thereby producing dire outcomes for some learners. There is an increasing racialized opportunity gap, resulting in greater incarceration rates, diminished life chances, and less positive sociopolitical outcomes for minoritized learners, including Black girls. The need to create learning environments that disrupt the educational violence that Black girls experience in schools is urgent.

This work is consistent with a growing subset of learning scientists who are directly addressing issues of race, power, and privilege (Esmond, 2017; Hand et. al, 2012; & Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). Within that subset of scholars, there are learning scientist who are "working to envision our field's collective responsibility toward decolonial justice" by calling the field to develop theories of learning that are situated in this historical political moment (Politics of Learning Writing Collective, 2017). By moving towards a learning theory that is grounded in the lived experiences of Black girls, this work, responds to the call for developing critically aware learning theories that recognize and address how issues of race, identity, and power mediate the experiences of learners (Yoon, 2017).

Theoretical approach

Shawn Ginwright's (2010) Radical Healing Model (RHM) prioritizes the healing of Black youth to happen simultaneous with their learning. RHM is an ecologically responsive strategy that 1) highlights the socially toxic conditions in communities 2) to build the capacity for youth to respond to their conditions 3) in ways that support social justice, agency and resistance thereby contributing to individual, community, and broader social wellness. Ginwright's model prioritizes the acknowledgment of "toxic conditions" or the oppressive circumstances in which Black youth are currently and have historically lived and learned. By beginning with an explicit acknowledgment of the inequitable and toxic context in which most Black girls learn, we can imagine new learning environments that not only eradicate but also redress the harm that stem from the structural and symbolic violence connected with their educational experience. Envisioning new learning environments allows us to imagine contexts that attend to school related harm through an educational praxis of healing. The RHM provides a framework from which to think of healing not solely as a psychological endeavor but as an ecologically responsive pedogeological framework.

This work couples RHM with Hand, Penual, and Gutiérrez's (2012) concept of (re)framing to establish the theoretical framework for which designers and practitioners can think differently about creating new more equitable learning environments. Hand, Penual, and Gutiérrez claim that "power plays out in everyday social interaction… through the stories, narratives and ideologies that serve as resources for interpreting and organizing ongoing activity" (p. 250). The way participants (usually teachers and students) organize and

interpret ongoing educational activities or interactions creates the frame. Frames are often invisible forces that position actors in ways that reify power and oppression. Furthermore, frames "shape the interaction that takes place within them and, hence, shape both access within learning opportunities and access to them" (Hand et. al, 2012, pg. 251). Since frames operate as invisible shapers and interpretive filters of interactions, it is important to make frames visible to recognize their role in either advancing or diminishing the educational trajectory of the youth involved. Hand, Penual, and Gutiérrez point to an example from Nasir's (2011) work, wherein teachers and school administrators orchestrate an invisible frame that was "inherently inequitable to African American students" (pg. 255). The frame was invisible to the students, consequently they participated without question or awareness. Although Black students in this example were actors in the frame, they were not creators, nor did they have the power to reframe. Therefore, students were effectively forced to accept and participate in the invisible frame, governing their educational experience, while also being victimized by it. Examples such as this, where students of color, who are operating under and within oppressive invisible frames, illustrate the need for (re)framing learning environments so that they can support student learning and development in non-oppressive, decolonial, and equitable ways (Hand et. al, 2012).

This work uses Engle & Conant (2002) productive disciplinary engagement frame (as cited in Hand et. al, 2012) to organize the learning environment in a way that positions Black girls to have more real and interpretive power of the organizational frame governing their learning environments. A productive disciplinary engagement (PDE) frame, moves minoritized students out of the role of passive learner/adopter of traditionally oppressive frames, into a position where they have the authority and obligation to make sense of domain ideas and procedures. The PDE frame allows learners to 1) problematize aspects of the domain, 2) exercise authority in approaching domain problems in a variety of ways, and 3) be held accountable for reasoning in ways that make sense to the learning goals and norms of the discipline (p. 256-7). Hand, Penual, and Gutierrez (2012) provide an example of the PDE frame in use, when they highlight an example of a math teacher, using a PDE frame to organize a learning experience for a Latina learner, who otherwise has a weak math identity. In their example, this teacher utilizes several discursive moves to position the student as the 'provider of knowledge,' as 'author of mathematical process,' and skillful 'navigator of the complex mathematical landscape' (p. 258-9). This example illustrates how a PDE frame can reorganize the learning environment to remediate dynamics of power and race by redistributing authority and creating greater relational equity between teacher and learner, particularly when the learner is entering from a less than equitable position (p. 259).

This work contents that a PDE frame within the context of a broader Radical Healing Praxis has the potential to not only (re)frame Black girl's learning environments in ways that are more immediately equitable, but also build Black girl's capacity to advocate for greater educational equity for themselves and others. (Re)framing the learning environment allows educators to operate in ways that empower Black girls to heal while giving them the authority to question, solve problems, and be held accountable to high content domain standards. The coupling of an empowering frame with a healing model allows us to work toward a radical healing praxis that supports the sociopolitical learning of Black girls.

Implications

Those attending to the state of Black girls and their education are saying that "we must develop gender and race-conscious prisms that capture the vulnerabilities they experience today" (Crenshaw, 2015, p.47). The Radical Healing Praxis for Black Girls not only provides a race and gender conscious prism, it also encourages practitioners and researchers to more critically explore learning environment design, enhance educational practices, and reimagine theoretical frames in ways to more equitably serve all children.

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