Critical Post-Traumatic Growth among Black Femme High School Students within the School to Prison Pipeline: A Focus on Healing

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Abstract

Both educational research and practices pay little attention to the experiences of girls related to trauma within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Educators typically take a deficit approach toward youth experiencing trauma and often reinforce trauma through discriminatory and exclusionary disciplinary practices. Using a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methodology centered in the authentic experiences of Black girls, with an intentional focus on their agency and growth, I conducted a research study that educated, coached, and supported a research team

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collectively known as Queens Speak. This research explored the emerging, explanatory conceptual framework of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. This framework combines Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth, highlighting eight tenets that can be used as a lens to both explore and increase the growth among Black girls. These tenets are: context, identity, struggle, resistance, navigation, community, voice and hope. Drawing from this framework, this article examines educational justice through the eyes of Black high school femmes: cis, trans and gender fluid girls who developed a research team to explore and share their lived experiences. It focuses specifically on the growth exhibited by Queens Speak during and after the YPAR project.

Introduction

It seems that the appetite for pictures showing bodies in pain is as keen, almost, as the desire for ones that show bodies naked (Sontag, 2003).

I am a trauma researcher who can no longer write about trauma. I sit down at the computer in an attempt to take the trauma narratives shared with me by young Black womxn[1] and weave them in a coherent manner to convince human rights educators that their lives matter too, and my fingers are frozen. I stand before my colleagues in a faculty meeting and attempt to share the truths that Black college students have divulged, displaying the fear and anxiety they feel about returning to virtual classrooms in the midst of the multiple crises of 2020 and I stutter. I read carefully crafted statements in an online training, hoping participants are given a glimpse into the humanity of our students' experiences and I stumble over my words.

I am not alone in this. During a time where videos and descriptions of Black death are easily accessible and often shared, many activists and researchers remind us of the impact of watching and constantly discussing this racialized trauma on our mental health. Furthermore, we carry

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[1] The term "womxn" is rooted in intersectional feminist literature. It is used in this paper to be inclusive of people who are trans and gender non-binary, and do not identify as men.

concerns that repeatedly viewing violence against Black people further dehumanizes and doesn't increase allyship, and rather is increasingly being labeled as, "trauma porn."

I am a trauma researcher, who can no longer write about trauma. And then, maybe that's the point. Maybe, in this era, in this season, what is needed is not another article about Black pain. Not another narrative of historical and systemic oppression. Not another glimpse into the wounds we as Black womxn and girls carry within educational spaces, specifically within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Maybe what I could add to the discourse are counter-narratives to the deficit based view of trauma, a glimpse into the resistance displayed by Queens Speak, a Black femme high school research team I co-founded in 2017. Maybe our Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) findings could shine a light on the growth and healing of Black girls.

Queens Speak created an opportunity for young women to use their own agency and voice in not only the creation of new knowledge and insight into their lives, but also in the development of recommendations for how girls should be treated in schools. I will highlight the work we embarked on together during our yearlong research project. Using the conceptual framework of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth that I developed, I commit to focusing on the growth.

This article examines educational justice through the eyes of Black femmes: cis, trans and gender non-conforming girls who developed a research team to explore and share their lived experiences. It focuses specifically on the growth exhibited by Queens Speak during and after the YPAR project; the creation of YPAR as a healing space; the role of scholars and community members in expanding our deficit view trauma; and the need to curate spaces where healing and growth can occur.

Positionality

I have carried trauma in this body since I was five years old. I hauled around racialized traumatic stress for longer than that. I ran away from preschool at 3 years old because I was the only Black child in the class and was uncomfortable with the stares and whispers. I walked several blocks to my Nan's house and hid in her garden waiting for someone to show up and reassure me I belonged. I was an intelligent, disengaged student most of my life. In British schools, I was often singled out for dress code violations and attitude problems. A White[2] male administrator once licked his finger and attempted to wipe the make-up off my face, except I didn't have eyeliner or mascara on, just dark brown eyes and naturally black lashes. When I immigrated to the US at age 16, I found my people on the margins. We built community outside of traditional school spaces, and when I got pregnant in my junior year, it was easy for me to stop attending (as I was hardly going to school anyway). In spite of, and maybe motivated by these exclusionary educational experiences, I found resistance through college success. I found revenge in proving to others I could get degrees, in spite of their explicit, and implicit, messages that told me I didn't belong.

My positionality as Black, female, trauma survivor, immigrant, teen mum, and someone who was pushed out of high school and spent young adulthood navigating poverty and the prison industrial complex, shapes my identity—still. These life experiences prepared and called me to engage in YPAR with Black femme high school students and explore alongside them our collective trauma and growth. Now, a tenure-track professor, I find myself navigating the academy and dealing with much of the same

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[2] *Editorial note: in adherence with the style guide of the American Psychological Association, the IJHRE capitalizes all racial groups in our articles, including Black, White and Indigenous. There has been general consensus for the capitalization of the "B" in "Black" with more debates around the term "White" versus "white." As scholar Eve L. Ewing writes (see here): "Language and racial categories have some important things in common: They are fluid, they are inherently political, and they are a socially constructed set of shared norms that are constantly in flux as our beliefs and circumstances change." We understand that language and conventions may change, and have decided at this moment in time, to capitalize all racial groups referenced in this special issue.*

institutional trauma and racialized stress as the girls described. In the midst of this, I grow. I heal. I resist.

Background & Context

      Black Girls Matter, Say Her Name, Arrest the Cops that killed Breonna Taylor have all been battle cries for Black womxn and girls over the last half decade. Contemporary social justice movements, whether pushing back against the School-to-Prison Pipeline, or confronting police brutality have tended to center the experiences of boys and men (Crenshaw, 2015). Research and public policy debates often fail to paint a nuanced picture that addresses the degree to which girls are vulnerable to many of the same factors faced by their male counterparts. The suspension and expulsion rates for Black girls far outpace the rates for other girls—and in some places, they outpace the rates of most boys (Crenshaw, 2015, p.14). In many districts, suspension rates have hovered around 12% for Black girls as compared to 2% for White girls, meaning that Black girls are suspended six times as often as White girls. Because feminist epistemologies tend to be concerned with the education of White girls and women and race-based epistemologies tend to be consumed with the educational barriers negatively effecting Black boys, the educational needs of Black girls have fallen through the cracks (Evans-Winters, 2007).

      Contemporary scholarship asserts Black girls' experience with exclusionary discipline produces similar outcomes to Black boys (Morris, 2012, 2016). Educational policies often "regulate students' nonviolent movements, labeling expressions and forms of communication as defiance and disobedience" (Wun, 2016, p. 182). When committed by Black girls, these behaviors are criminalized by the school authorities (Wun, p. 183). We also know Black girls are more likely to be suspended or expelled for issues that center on disrespect or willful defiance (Morris, 2012). This aggressive punishment of norm violations is used to help maintain the existing social order rather than changing society—or education—to benefit the most disadvantaged Black women or girls (Richie, 2012, p.103).

Use of the term *School-to-Prison Pipeline* (STPP) in this article expands the traditional STPP framework that only uplifts the impact of disparate disciplinary action that criminalizes youth of color in schools. We cannot focus purely on discipline practices as contributors to the prison pipeline; we must also address issues related to the educational system's need to uphold dangerous stereotypes that control and dominate Black minds and bodies [these stereotypes are discussed in length in my forthcoming article (Ault, 2021)]. According to Sojoyner (2016), we must strive to understand the complex relationship of the enclosure processes—which "embod(y) the removal/withdrawal/denial of services and programs that are key to the stability and long-term well-being of communities" (p. xiii)—that have brought us to the current moment. Based on the history of exclusion and enclosure of Black communities, we are forced to examine the complexity of the current relationship between schools and prisons in the United States (Sojoyner, 2016).

We must also challenge the strategies employed by schools, often fueled by community organizations within the non-profit industrial complex, that attempt to co-opt the radical transformative spaces inside and outside of schools. This co-optation "neutralize(s) efforts to dismantle racial, gendered, class and sexed hierarchies" (p. 193). I therefore use the term School-to-Prison Pipeline to describe the carceral environment of policing and dehumanizing that happens in classrooms, and on school campuses, that leaves Black students, including femmes, in literal and figurative bondage.

Human Rights Education

The work of Queens Speak situates the current School-to-Prison Pipeline in a context of centuries of human rights abuses against Black people, including: the transatlantic slave trade; the Black Codes; Jim Crow; the rape, brutalization, exploitation of Black women; and the exclusion and

adultification of Black girls.[3] Situating the School-to-Prison Pipeline in an historical context is necessary to comprehend the complexity of Black youth experiences within school settings. This allows us to not only understand the historical systems of oppression that have been perpetuated through US education, but also understand the power, strength and resistance that exists among young people amidst the trauma of their oppression. The education system in the United States continues to have a long history of violating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), including Article 1: All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights; and Article 26: Everyone has the right to education.

Based on the ongoing racism and educational inequities facing Black students, it is evident that the US has not created sufficient strategies to abide by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) nor the International Convention to Eliminate Racial Discrimination (CERD). We thus turn to Human Rights Education (HRE) as a framework to elevate Critical Post-Traumatic Growth inside and outside of the school space. HRE has the opportunity to make ethical and material differences in the lives of youth, propel students to engage in democratic citizenship, and combat socioeconomic and structural educational disparities by creating conditions that not only promote school attendance but also (re)socialize students academically (Hantzopoulos, 2016, p. 47). We must, however, proceed with caution, for without dialogue and consideration of students' specific social contexts, human rights—which are designed to be liberating—can be "part of a hegemonic discourse, used instead to control" (Hantzopoulos, 2016, p. 37). These ongoing instances of structural racism lead to well-documented instances of traumatic stress among Black students in the US.

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[3] Burton (2007) notes that "adultification comprises contextual, social, and developmental processes in which youth are prematurely, and often inappropriately, exposed to adult knowledge and assume extensive adult roles and responsibilities within their family network."

Racialized Traumatic Stress

The conditions experienced by Black youth in urban communities impact their psychosocial, physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Ginwright, 2016). Black youth have to navigate an environment of persistent and racialized traumatic stress. The traumatic experiences of Black girls are compounded by the trauma they experience on a daily basis. We must therefore force schools to move beyond color blind conversations of grit, growth mindset and resilience, towards a deep discovery about complex trauma, critical growth and resistance.

The context calls for us to develop spaces that directly address the healing of those who have experienced trauma. This commitment to justice must extend beyond the immediate trauma and include the acknowledgement and healing of racialized infractions (McGee & Stovall, 2015; Ault 2017). In addition, the process of teaching students about "Socially Engineered Trauma" and racialized traumatic stress is a critical foundation of culturally relevant mental health (Shaia, Avruch, Green & Godsey, 2019). Socially Engineered Traumas are defined as traumatic events rooted in social forces of oppression that can result in students experiencing reduced shame and self-blame as they increase their knowledge of how their larger social context impacts their individual functioning (Shaia, Avruch, Green & Godsey, 2019). In addition, Ault (2017) uses the term racialized traumatic stress to collectively describe all of the trauma resulting from racism in all its forms.

Abolitionist Callings

We currently exist in a space in time where abolition and defunding the police—especially in schools—has become a foreseeable and viable option. These conversations have resulted in movements around the country demanding for the removal of law enforcement, in the form of School Resource Officers, from schools and calling for efforts to replace them with social workers and counselors. These holistic responses are also manifesting themselves outside of school spaces as communities work to

provide their own mental health response teams independent of law enforcement agencies. For example MH First community response hotlines in [Oakland](#) and [Sacramento](#) provide a community driven alternative for individuals experiencing mental health crises.

Queens Speak cautions us to be careful about making blanket recommendations to increase mental health and social emotional support for students of color. Reminding us, "if there is any support in school, it is always White psychologists and counselors. We need people that went through what we went through and can relate to us; people that look like us" (Queens Speak participant). These abolitionist healing models, therefore, offer us direction as we consider grassroots and culturally affirming healing options inside school spaces. Bettina Love (2019) calls us to tear down and rebuild schools using intersectional tactics of past and present abolitionists. In addition, the [Abolitionist Teaching Network](#) founded by Love, whose mission is to develop and support educators to fight injustice within their schools and communities, serves as a collective space for organizing, educating and collaboration.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth is formed within the intersections of Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth. Working with Queens Speak, I was searching for a conceptual framework that would push back against the solely deficit-based frame many were using to examine trauma. We wanted to uplift the growth and agency of Black girls who had experienced trauma. Post-Traumatic Growth is defined as "the experience of positive change resulting from the struggle with major life crises" (Calhoun, Cann & Tedeschi, 2010, p.1; Rendon, 2015). Joseph (2001) confirmed that traumatic events could also serve as a catalyst for positive change within individuals. Joseph's assertion that "rather than ruining one's life, a traumatic event can actually improve it" has implications for young people, especially young women of color that are both insightful and

problematic (2001, p. x). While it is imperative to ensure that we do not minimize the devastating short- and long-term effects of trauma, it is also important to explore a counter-narrative consisting of both positive and negative consequences that young women may encounter after experiencing trauma.

One of the obstacles in the expansion of Post-Traumatic Growth as a framework has been the tendency for researchers to ignore the cultural and racial context of stress and coping (Weiss & Berger, 2010). Critical Race Theory (CRT) therefore offers us a lens through which to explore Post-Traumatic Growth further. CRT draws from and extends a broad literature base of critical theory in law, sociology, history, education, ethnic studies and women's studies (Bell, 1976, 1980; Ladson-Billings and Tate 1995; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2005; Stovall, 2006). CRT holds useful tenets in examining school experiences, such as: the centrality of racism and White supremacy in US society; a commitment to social justice; and the importance of first person narratives from people of color. Within the context of this article, of particular interest is the notion of White supremacy, which is described as:

> A political, economic and cultural system in which Whites overwhelmingly control power and material resources, conscious and unconscious ideas of White superiority and entitlement are widespread, and relations of White dominance and non-White subordination are daily re-enacted across a broad array of institutions and social settings. (Mills, 2003, p.179)

This foundational understanding of White supremacy is critical when recognizing the potential systemic damage of educational policy and the impact of colorblind policies, such as zero tolerance, that may have no *de jure* mention of race but are interpreted within school systems to disparately affect students of color (Stovall, 2006), specifically Black girls. CRT theorists are committed to examining the ways power and privilege structure and shape education, and push this understanding into action. As we strive to teach social justice, or teach the importance of uplifting counter-stories, the counter-narratives of Queens Speak are important in

contradicting the dominant deficit-based narratives, particularly in regards to trauma.

Critical Post-Traumatic Growth (CPTG) draws upon concepts and methodologies from Critical Race Theory and Post-Traumatic Growth, and serves as a critical lens through which to interrogate the trauma, healing and growth of Black female students. In my original study (Ault, 2017), I used critical ethnography in order to examine the lived experiences of Queens Speak in light of the literature and explore CPTG further. Eight tenets emerged that were both uplifted in the research and displayed by the girls as they navigated educational spaces. These tenets of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth are context, suffering, identity, community, voice, resistance, navigation and hope. Rather than explore all of these tenets in this article, I will provide an overview of Queens Speak's knowledge contributions, focusing specifically on healing and growth.

Our current context—namely, the racial uprisings of 2020, Covid-19, distance learning, and the effects of climate change illustrated by the devastating wildfires of California—has afforded us the opportunity to recognize Critical Post-Traumatic Growth all around us. Black youth and community members are simultaneously experiencing interpersonal and community violence along with all of the other traumas of the era. Concurrently, many Black women and girls are describing deeper relational connections and a return to African spirituality and healing modalities. Groups are advocating for spending time outside in nature in order to positively impact mental health. For example, GirlTrek activates thousands of Black women to be change makers. A recent GirlTrek campaign provided free 21-day mediations where participants could learn about the historical and contemporary contributions of Black women while getting outside to walk. Additionally there is a renewed interest in therapy. Even my own organization, the Race and Gender Equity Project, has opened a healing space providing ancestral and youth-centered healing options for youth both in-person and virtually. Finally, local youth-led social justice efforts have positioned young people at the forefront for making mental health recommendations, including work by Youth Forward to expand peer-to-peer mental wellness supports on school campuses.

Methodology

Youth Participatory Action Research

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a critical research methodology that focuses on centralizing youth voice and placing young people in the position as experts in their own education and experiences (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006; Bautista et. al, 2013). YPAR encompasses three principles: "the collective investigation of a problem; the reliance on Indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem; and the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 157). YPAR is more than a research methodology; rather it is at once, a methodology, pedagogy, and a theory of action for creating social justice and social change (Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008). In the Queens Speak project, YPAR was both the methodological tool used to examine the phenomena of youth trauma, and the healing process used to positively impact growth. By combining CPTG with YPAR, a pedagogical space of resiliency and resistance can be developed, which challenges the dominant mindset, increases academic engagement and achievement, promotes healing, and builds new understandings of the strength and assets of youth of color and the communities from which they come from (Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008). YPAR provided a space where youth had an individual and collective sense of agency as they uplifted and addressed systemic racism (Welton & Bertrand, 2019).

First person narratives are an integral part of CRT pedagogy. Storytelling can function as a form of self-defense and personal agency despite historical silences and targeted violence by governmental authorities or public institutions like schools (Phillips, 2015). Ultimately, Queens Speak strived to create a space in which personal testimony became political praxis (Phillips, 2015). YPAR approaches engage in critical and collective inquiry as well as reflection and action focused on "reading" and speaking back to the reality of the world, their world (Freire, 1993, p. 2.) Community organizations also use YPAR to support youth in engaging in

liberatory and radical inquiry (Villa, 2018). YPAR in itself is resistive pedagogy. By focusing on Black girls as agents rather than objects within systems of power within society, we position them as creators of knowledge and acknowledge their everyday formal and informal acts of resistance (Brown, 2009; Jacobs, 2016). In this study YPAR became formal resistance that led to transformation, which can be defined as systemic and institutional change to promote social justice (Freire, 1993) as well as individual radical healing.

Our Process

Through my relationship with the local school district and area high schools, I gained access and permission to conduct the Queens Speak project at a local high school site, using the Blacks Making a Difference (BMAD) Leadership program as a starting point to engage youth. BMAD was an elective within the high school's expanded learning (7th period) space. BMAD provided a space where young people developed leadership and advocacy skills. I had been an adult supporter/mentor with BMAD for several years. Using a snowball sampling technique, I selected co-researchers in the roles of research team participants based initially on teacher or facilitator recommendation, students' engagement in their leadership class, students' desire to participate in the research project, and their interest in being involved in school and community change.

I initially identified ten Black students to participate on the research team, consisting of cis-gendered, trans and gender non-conforming/gender fluid students. At the time of the project, all research team members self-identified as Black females and ranged in age from 15-18. As the project ensued, other girls wanted to join the research team. The core team agreed to have enrollment be open. The total number of enrolled girls was fifteen, although participation and attendance varied throughout the eight months of research. The research team named their research group *Queens Speak*. They described choosing "queen" as a way to push back on the negative stereotypes surrounding Black women. During the naming process, two of the students talked openly about the fluidity of their gender and whether

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"queen" adequately described them. They discussed and contemplated having a gender-neutral term; however, the group ultimately decided that they primarily identified as strong Black womxn whose ancestors may have included African kings and queens. They determined that the name felt appropriate and inclusive.

As researchers develop participatory action research projects in collaboration with young people, research teams can learn from the Black Lives Matter movement to push past the gender binaries that have historically shaped our justice movements. Queens Speak became a place for non-men to express their unique experiences within the School-to-Prison Pipeline. The research team collected data from other Black female students participating in BMAD programs at their high school and neighboring schools. They called these focus groups *Women's Empowerment Chats.*

Queens Speak collaboratively developed their own research questions, which were as follows:

1) How do we as Black girls describe ourselves?

2) What struggles do Black girls have?

3) In what ways do our struggles make us stronger?

4) What do Black girls need to be successful in school?

5) What recommendations do we have for schools to better serve and teach us?

As I met with potential participants, read youth poetry and explored their journals in preparation for this project, it became apparent that the Queens Speak students had experienced extensive individual, community and systemic trauma. To maximize safety, the youth themselves would not be called to unpack or address each other's traumatic histories. We addressed and discussed any instances of trauma that were organically brought up; however, we framed conversations to focus on *struggle* rather than trauma. This decision was made to avoid enhancing secondary trauma, as well as to preclude students from feeling pressured to share their trauma narratives with their peers. If trauma was directly disclosed in groups or interviews, follow-up happened with the students outside of the group sessions. This follow up was conducted by both myself and the BMAD

facilitators. In order to further understand the trauma and growth experienced by the young people, I developed secondary research questions that informed my meta-analysis of the CPTG revealed through the Queens Speak sessions. These questions were: 1) What types of trauma have Black girls, within the School-to-Prison Pipeline, experienced? and 2) How do the emerging tenets of CPTG illustrate the experiences of Black girls within the School-to-Prison Pipeline?

Project Design

The methodology for the project, adapted from Duncan Andrade & Morrell (2008), entailed five different phases as illustrated in Figure 1 below:

Setting a research agenda: How do we want to tell our story? How can I best explore trauma and growth?

Primary data collection: Focus groups and interviews; Secondary data collection: Document analysis and observation

Data analysis: What have we learned about our community? What is the data telling us?

Action: How can we share our story with others in a variety of ways?

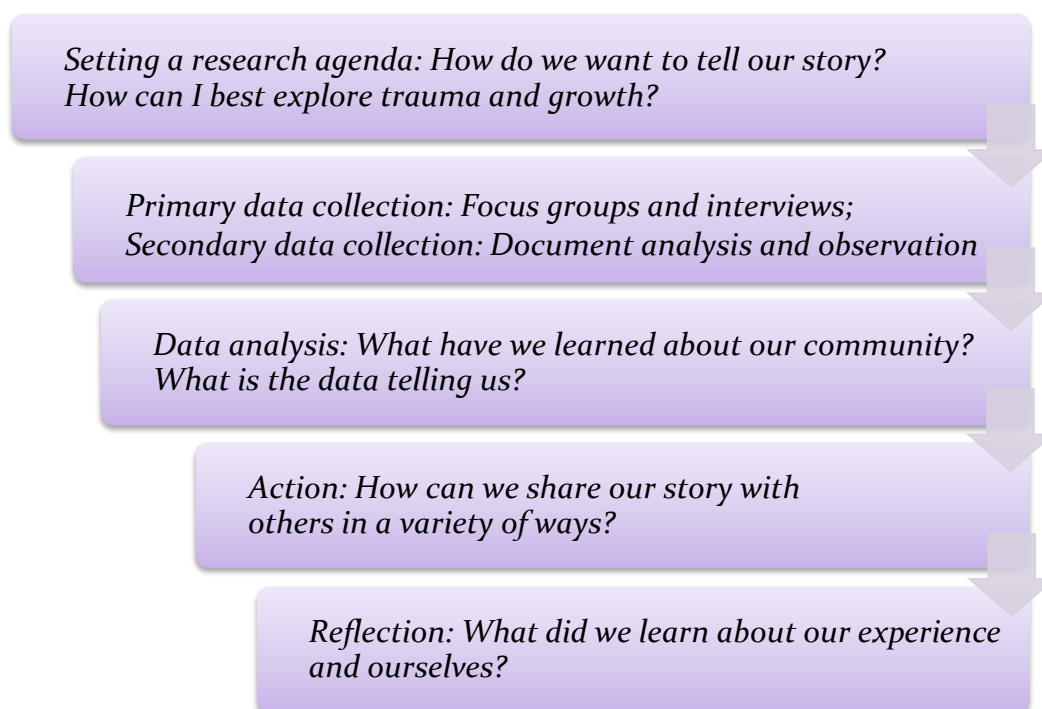*Reflection: What did we learn about our experience and ourselves?*

Figure 1. Phases of the Project

In order to triangulate their data, Queens Speak chose to conduct interviews, focus groups, and journal entries as their primary data collection methods. During Phase 1, they interviewed each other in order to both

practice their interviewing skills and develop a context for the focus groups. In addition, I conducted a critical ethnography in order to explore the culture of Black girls in relationship to CPTG. This ethnographic process included observation, interviews and document analysis. Ultimately, all of the interactions and experiences during the course of the year became usable data as we unpacked and examined the new phenomenon of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. Some of the data collection and data sharing methods included: songs, videos, poster art, appearance, and food.

To explore the secondary research questions, I conducted regular observations of the girls in their leadership programs, including Queens Speak. I used my journal to document interactions between the participants, paying close attention to the conversations they had with each other. Observation is the best technique to use when an activity, event, or situation can be observed first-hand, especially when a fresh perspective is desired (Merriam, 2009).

According to Merriam (2009) documents of any kind can help a researcher "uncover meaning, develop understanding, and discover insights relevant to the research problem" (p. 163). In this project I used participants' documents both prior to and during the YPAR project. Poetry and journal entries provided background information as well as further insight into the girls' lived experiences (Bowen, 2009). The preliminary document analysis revealed the extent of trauma that participants had experienced and shaped how we rolled out questions related to trauma and struggle. Both Queens Speak members and I also kept reflection journals for the duration of the project. These reflection journals were analyzed and coded collectively.

During and after the data collection phase, the youth researchers and I worked together to organize our data, read and summarize our findings, describe, classify and group our data into themes, and interpret our data (Creswell, 2013). I transcribed the focus group and interview sessions and we reviewed and discussed their content as a group. I gave preliminary suggestions regarding the themes I was noticing, and we used flip charts and markers to write them down, subsequently pasting them on the walls of the rooms in which we gathered. We collectively reviewed data to see whether or not it fit into the categories we were developing. We also

checked regularly with other participants to see whether or not we had missed anything and whether we had captured the essence of our discussions. Ultimately, we harnessed our data into a coherent and unified story that represented our findings with the hope we could motivate our subsequent audience into action (Mirra et.al, 2016). This action culminated in a community-wide Empowerment Chat where the young people shared their findings with their peers, their parents and systems leaders in creative and artistic ways. They wanted the event to be rooted in youth culture and "not a lecture" so they created posters to share their data, held a gallery walk in which they discussed the findings in small groups, read poetry, and facilitated a community conversation about their recommendations for change. They also had food, a DJ and a photo booth to ensure their peers were engaged and uplifted.

Study Findings and Discussion: Reflection, Growth & Action

In the original study (Ault, 2017), I offered composite profiles for six of the research team members. I chose not to share every student's profile and used pseudonyms in their profiles to protect their privacy. In addition, the team collectively decided all of the quotes shared would be attributed collectively to *Queens Speak* rather than individual members. This highlights the collective nature of the entire process and their desire to be seen as an anonymous group of girls, pushing back on the hypervisibility they often felt when they spoke up. To maintain additional privacy, I have also ascribed a pseudonym to the high school that I will call "Brookside."

Identity

Within their BMAD leadership class, Queens Speak had been learning how to develop critical consciousness focused on systematic injustices and actions required to overcome social and economic oppression (Cammarota, 2011). Without an intentional focus on understanding and dismantling systems of oppression, Queens Speak students would not have developed what Paulo Freire calls conscientização (Freire, 2010), or a

transformative educational process that begins with the creation of pedagogical spaces where members of marginalized communities are enabled to gain an understanding, or consciousness, of how their own experiences have been shaped by larger social institutions (Freire, 1993; Akom, Cammarota & Ginwright, 2008).

All of the Queens Speak members were able to develop a collective understanding of their history and identity through this critical lens that was connected to their growth. Similarly, Shin, Daly, and Vera (2007) assert that when students develop a positive ethnic identity, it acts as a protective factor against being affected by the systemic violence that students are often exposed to in urban areas. Moreover, positive peer norms and higher ethnic identity correlate with higher school engagement, while negative peer norms and lower ethnic identity correlate with lower school engagement (Shin, Daly, & Vera, 2007).

This collective history was described by Queens Speak in this way:

It's important to know where you came from to know where you are going. It's also important to know how other people made it to where you wanna go. These schools and teachers don't always help you. But there's a way through. We have to help each other find it.

Additionally, as Queens Speak developed a more critical understanding of systemic racism, they described having an increased self-efficacy: Once you understand the system isn't set up for you, you realize you are going to have to figure out ways around things. You will also stop setting yourself up for failure by getting into it with teachers and stuff. You ain't gon win. But you can set up things that work for you.

It is important to support Black girls in the development of their identity that is situated within both a socio-historical context, as well as their current reality. Black girls must therefore be given space to get to know and develop their own authentic identity. In addition, in the midst of a growing enthusiasm to counteract negative stereotypes, researchers must not create new stereotypes—overly positive images that fail to accurately reflect the complexity of the lives of Black girls (Hull, Scott & Smith, 1982). Scholarship must also be mindful of the nuances of race, class and gender

and push for an intersectional lens as the driving force of educational transformation. As one Queens Speak member stated:

> My struggles growing up for me and still is today, is accepting the way I was made and not even looks—I believe I'm very beautiful—but my attitude, the way I speak, etc. I am very outspoken and I stand for what I believe in. I have a very projected voice and I'm not afraid to tell you how I feel. Growing up that seemed to be a problem for those around me. I was always misunderstood for having an attitude or being mean, etc. I was told I'm not gonna make it far in life because of my attitude. I envied the "quiet or calm kids." I wished so bad to be like them.

It is important to recognize the humanity and complexity of Black girls, even as we examine their collective experience. In our attempt to make meaning of what we are discovering, we must be careful not to create monolithic caricatures that simplify and further stereotype Black youth.

Power and agency

Queens Speak members demonstrated a belief in their own power and ability to be successful. It appeared as though the more they believed in their own capability, the easier it became for them to navigate systems of oppression. In turn, the more they realized that the system was built on inequities, the less they internalized their failures. For example, one of the students had been expelled the year before we began Queens Speak. She enrolled in a local charter school rather than attend an alternative school program and returned to Brookside for 7th period on the days we met.

It was important to Queens Speak that the research space included a place for the sharing of personal stories. For example, one student shared the following as a focus group introduction. This set the stage for all the other girls to engage in transparent and vulnerable conversations:

> Y'all know I was kicked out of school. Y'all may not know my story tho'. I'm a junior. I used to go here but yeah. Right now I'm adopted, my mom she just got out prison, a couple of months ago or whatever. She has three kids, we all currently live in different

households. I never had a dad. But I was just trying to find out where I fit in, and not really feeling comfortable. I was always lashing out. Always in trouble. Always in the office. I finally got kicked out of here for something stupid. Like, not even fighting. But I realize the system is set up for me to fail. I'm going to succeed. With or without support. Like, I appreciate how we have set up a support system for each other. Nothing can stop me now. I am going to be everything I set out to be.

Shortly thereafter, another student shared how they dealt with some of the difficult and traumatic experiences they had undergone.

I empower myself. I don't need others to tell me things in order for me to do it. Sometimes hearing it is good or knowing it's there is good, but I don't wanna feel as if I need it. I want to have the ability to tell myself I'm going to do something and do it with no hesitation or second thoughts. No one is going to give you anything and everyone that says they're there for you probably won't be there forever. Actually, I know they aren't going to be here forever. Everyone is temporary.

This belief in one's own power and ability to heal, when coupled with an understanding of history and social justice, is an important part of rewriting a trauma narrative. It is important for young women to realize they have the power to heal and transform themselves and to understand their own worth and contribution to the world that no one else can make but them (Winn & Franklin, 2014).

Scholar Activism & Community Building

Queens Speak members were also involved in community activism and advocacy. For many, this focus on others is an important part of Post-Traumatic Growth. Community activism or social justice involvement can also help people look for the positive within difficult circumstances (Rendon, 2014). For example, Queens Speak cohosted bi-monthly BMAD

family breakfasts, where, in the spirit of the Black Panther Party,[4] the young people cooked breakfast for their community at either a school site or a community location. They invited children and parents to join them as they broke bread, socialized and engaged in other community building, youth-led rituals.

> One Queens Speak member shared:
>
> Even doing the [BMAD family] breakfasts helps us out inside. We can be having a bad day or a bad week or whatever, but then we get together for breakfast and cook for families and little people. The kids are running around and having fun, and we feel better almost instantly.
>
> Sometimes [after the breakfast] we gave out the leftovers to people who were homeless. It makes you realize even when things are bad, you have a roof over your head, you can make it to school, you can find something to eat. You don't have to rummage in dumpsters.

Peer-to-peer supports

Peer support is based on the idea that people who have experienced and overcome a particular type of adversity can serve as a source of support, encouragement and hope to others experiencing similar situations and may also be uniquely positioned to promote service engagement (Walker, et. al, 2018). The Queens Speak members were all focused on supporting each other and leaving a legacy for the younger generation. They were involved in peer-to-peer tutoring and adopted strict norms about the types of behavior they would engage in around younger children. It appeared as though this legacy-building helped them stay focused on continuing to mature and grow even amidst their trauma.

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[4] In 1969, The Black Panther Party held their first free breakfast for children at St. Augustine's Episcopal Church in Oakland. One of over 60 survival programs pioneered by the BPP, the free breakfast for children program met a need in the Black community. The US government started offering free breakfast in schools in 1975. Learn more here: https://search.freedomarchives.org/search.php?s=free+breakfast

All of the following quotes blossomed out of a conversation in which Queens Speak asked each other how they imagined their role in creating change for their young family and members of the community. They led each other in a journaling exercise from which came these words of wisdom:

> It's time for us to be leaders and change the Black community from negative to positive. Adults today can't do much for us. It's our job because we're the next generation. It's up to us to change what's going on because we're up next.

> This is what you should know because most people won't tell you: Make an impact in your community for what you think is right, self-educate yourself and become better than what is around you. Last but not least, not only help yourself but others. Help make a difference in other people's lives.

> We need to choose the right decisions. Take all the chances you can to benefit you and your family. I chose to keep my mind on a positive note to be a good example for my brothers and sisters. To help them out once I become successful and make sure they get on a positive track as well.

> The babies—they look up to us. We have to do better so they don't have to go through the things we go through.

Queens Speak also described the impact of standing up for each other, recognizing that it wasn't enough for them to impact the younger generation, they also needed to support each other through their ups and downs.

> I love noticing that it's not just me having the day-to-day problems that I face because I'm always told I'm "tripping", but there's no way that approximately 13 girls are "tripping" about all the same problems. We have to speak up. Maybe if we all talk at once, they'll listen.

Expanding opportunities for Black girls to engage in peer mentoring potentially reduces their invisibility, which was highlighted as a source of trauma for Queens Speak (Buck, et. al., 2017; Ault, 2017). As one Queens Speak member stated:

Being a Black girl, I feel that we need to work on building each other up. Often, we despise and say mean and hurtful things to one another which constantly breaks down the confidence and self-esteem of the next Black girl. We need to start doing the opposite of that and build each other up, give each other compliments, tell one another that they are beautiful, intelligent, and can amount to so much more than what society has said that they can. Encouraging each other I think will build a stronger Black community within the girls and women, and even the men, and we will be more powerful together and others will begin to respect us once we start to respect each other.

Creative Expression & The Arts

The use of art in the healing process is effective because it helps focus people on new activities that absorb them in the process of creating something (Rendon, 2015). Tapping into creative ways of thinking through the arts can also help inspire people to find more creative ways to address their problems (Rendon, 2015). In addition, schools have historically been a site that can foster Black consciousness and cultural expression (Sojoyner, 2016).

Queens Speak members were all inspired by the arts in some way. They expressed themselves creatively and used the arts as a form of self-expression, healing and voice:

I love to sing and dance and sometimes write poetry. I really just love entertaining people. I like to make people feel good and laugh a lot and try hard to be as positive as possible.

It gives me a chance to express myself in a way that is unimaginable. I admire the way they go up there and pour out their heart and soul in their words and tone of voice I love every aspect of poetry. It's the most beautiful thing.

[I express myself] through writing or I'll verbally express it, but usually writing works. Even writing in my journal helps me process.

At first, I thought it was annoying, now I use it as a way to capture my day and make sense of everything that happened.

A Black femme community member joined us for one of our sessions. This community leader, whom we shall call "Dominique", shared her experiences with community organizing and art. She made African jewelry. She shared how learning about and creating art connected her to her ancestors and how that, in and of itself, can be resistance. Dominique told the young people:

It wasn't until I was in a difficult situation that I realized I was a Black _woman_. Prior to that I fought for Black issues, but then when I realized I was also woman, I realized as Black women, we have particular needs. It is important that we speak for ourselves and articulate our needs to our community. It is important that other members of our community are able to organize in support of us, get behind us.

While conducting the Queens Speak project, the members were invited by a nonprofit ([Future Youth Records](#)), to record songs specifically related to the empowerment of girls. This was a perfect example of how they were able to combine research, art and healing. [_Listen to the song here]._ Watching the young people come together to create was inspiring. They stated, "It's like all the things we talked about in the research group came together in a song. So it's not just our voice. It's a lot of voices." The chorus reads:

I am the change. I'm done trying to please you.
We killing the game, baby just be you
No more playing it safe, I'm going my own way
The way I walk, the way I talk
I am a queen, this is me.

Verbalizing many of the issues we had been discussing, including negative stereotyping and overall struggles, juxtaposed with agency, power and unbridled resistance in the song. The song describes some of the themes highlighted by the girls in their trauma narratives including community violence and interpersonal trauma. They also push back on a

single narrative of negativity and uplift the importance of community in both supporting them, and encouraging them to become change. They flow:

> *... I missed the way that I used to be/oblivious to all this cruelty/families crying over eulogies/girls not understanding true beauty/but this reality made me/My success is moving hastily/I was made to be, ahead of the game/give back to my community, be the change you see/even at my lowest mama always seemed to show her support in me/BMAD family, helping to uplift and show me positivity/It was new to me, and it's crazy/that what made me was the struggle/but it saved me, the grind paid me/it's a woman's world and it's crazy.*

Healing and Reimagining

Part of the healing process involves reimagining a future, a new narrative, a vision. Without new visions, we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless and cynical, but we also forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us (Kelly, 2002). "This refusal to give up on an anti-racist, anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist, anti-caste feminist imaginary is the refusal to give up hope for change" (Singh, 2018, p.103). "When movements have been unable to clear the clouds, it has been the poets ... who have succeeded in imagining the color of the sky, in rendering the kinds of dreams and futures social movements are capable of producing" (Kelly, 2002, p. 9). This intersection of poetry, healing and social justice resonated with many of the girls as we attempted to create a space in which their imagination would be inspired. Queens Speak write:

> I like to write poetry and perform it. It's such a rush. Also, it gives me a chance to express myself in a way that is unimaginable. I admire the way they go up there and pour out their heart and soul in their words and tone of voice. I love every aspect of poetry it's the most beautiful thing. I am so excited to do this because not only do I get to express my feelings and voice my observations, but I get to talk

about real things, not be afraid to get personal but also to be able to cope with the everyday struggle of being me.

Queens Speak imagined schools that were: "[Places where] we would be free, our soul would be free, we wouldn't have all this baggage, unless it came from home, then we would have somewhere to go to." They also uplifted school as being "a way of escape—the baggage from school piles onto what I'm already going through it makes it worse." As we reimagine schooling and work to dismantle oppressive school systems, we must strive, alongside youth, to build spaces where they feel valued and free.

Community

The Research Team also came up with some recommendations for the local Black community, stressing that at the same time as we are advocating for change within the public school system, they should be pressing and pushing our community to better support them as young Black women. They recognized change was occurring at the intersection of schools and community, and it was not enough for teachers or support staff to merely represent their identity groups. They felt strongly that their healing was linked to social justice and called us to use an intersectional lens that did not focus solely on race, but also gender, age and ability.

They also called out the historical nature of racism and challenged us as adults to be more critical in our analysis, and less critical in our judgement. A Queens Speak member states, we need to "stop helping add to the stereotypes—all the stuff we go through. It's like the community forgot there was racism and want us to "fix" everything about ourselves without recognizing where it comes from."

According to Buck et al. (2017), students consistently highlighted the importance of mentors who were less formal or authoritarian in approach. The participants stressed that they needed non-judgmental and supportive adults who were willing to vulnerably share their own stories. A participant states, "don't judge us; you can help us. Listen to our stories… and share your stories with Black girls. You may have gone through something that can help us. Many of us are trying to get where you are."

In addition to support, the young people valued the concept of family. Looking to each other as well as the adults, they honored and appreciated the community they belonged to and supported each other as valued members of their family. They share "I really wouldn't be here without my BMAD family. Jody and Mama Stacey and all of us for real... we in this together."

Social & Emotional Support

The students described the need for additional social and emotional support in school. They also shared that they wished there were more supports designed specifically for Black students. They felt as though these supports should be aligned with and support them academically, as well, and not merely pull them out of class to get help. For example, one Queens Speak member stated, "we have programs like anger management in our school; they be helping, but then we are missing class and falling behind. How I'm supposed to feel about that? *Angry* [laughs]."

Another participant uplifted the need for support outside of teachers. She states:

> We need more counselors, psychologists to talk to. You can't put our problems on a timetable... you have to get to know us. Plus we students have to open up. Oftentimes we aren't comfortable sharing what's going on with us ...

Queens Speak also noted there were few places they could go to engage with their peers in positive ways. In addition, they noted the importance of getting outside, such as spending time in their high school garden or in local parks. They collectively asked the school system's leaders to "Create a safe haven for young people in our own communities; More community centers, spaces where we can congregate and have fun. Like more teen groups." They also uplifted environmental justice issues, for example, "more street lights and green space (parks) in our community. White communities have this, especially as a result of gentrification. This is important, it makes us feel valued and safe."

Conclusion

As community engaged scholars exploring human rights education, we are called to recognize the trauma experienced by Black girls and recognize the agency, healing and growth demonstrated by young people. Queens Speak allowed us all to explore the juxtaposition of trauma, healing and growth in our own lives. Youth Participatory Action Research can be a liberatory pedagogy used to place youth as creators of knowledge and a space that in and of itself can be medicine. What initially began as a way to collect data became a healing mechanism, a way to process our experiences and rewrite our narratives. Given space to build community, explore their identity, reimagine school spaces, and support each other, youth can move from being recipients of service, to providers of peer-to-peer mental health wellness.

As transformative educators, we must ensure we have space for cis and trans girls and gender non-conforming, gender fluid students to assess, create and develop the change they want to see. We must create a dynamic movement where the focus is on inclusivity and solidarity as young people push to dismantle White supremacy, racialized capitalism and cis heteropatriarchy within the educational system.

These words from members of the research team, encapsulate the project, and the opportunity. They state "we are what we need ... Through tears, frustration and heartache you remember that you've grown from a struggle and being able to express your struggles to someone can impact the next person's life."

Finally, I close with a quote from a research team member who reminds us of the power of Critical Post-Traumatic Growth. She states:

> A struggle could inspire you. People often look at struggles as a bad thing because of what they went through but never look at it in a positive perspective. If it wasn't for that challenge you went through you wouldn't grow.

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