

Interrogating and Innovating Comparative and International Education Research

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Symposium statement: Destabilizing power and authority: Taking intersectionality seriously

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The comments below reflect my position as a girlhood studies scholar and feminist activist engaged in human rights advocacy at the United Nations. Over the last ten years, I have partnered with teenage girl activists and colleagues at the UN to advance the global girls' rights movement. These intergenerational partnerships inform both my activism and research on feminist girlhood(s) and girls' political subjectivity; my current work examines the ways in which globalizing discourses of neoliberal girlpower shape international development agendas aimed at adolescent girls in the global south and heralded by those in the global north. Thus while my research does not sit squarely within the realm of comparative and international education, it does contribute to the plenary conversation about destabilizing power and authority vis-à-vis transformative research practices. I recently published an article in the *Girlhood Studies* journal on intergenerational ethics¹ and the relational messiness of conducting feminist research on and with girl activists. I reference some of this work in my comments as it remains demonstrative of the unique challenges and opportunities for feminist and/or socially just research praxis.

In what ways can research and practice destabilize and transform knowledge hierarchies?

Because of the intersections of gender and age, research on girls and girlhood(s) challenges normative patterns of research inquiry, design, and implementation; indeed to investigate girls and girlhood(s) requires the inherent disruption of knowledge under traditional hierarchies of power. Girls do not often have access to power and resources, their lives and experiences are all but invisible in research not explicitly about them, and as Mary Celeste Kearney (2009) remarks, girls represent a “demographic group that has been consistently marginalized, trivialized, and exploited” (21). Therefore to claim that *girl* is a legitimate, if marginalized, subject with voice and knowledge is to challenge normative structures of power. This practice as an intersectional approach pictures girls as actors and agents with the ability to author their own ‘objective’ truth; it moreover instrumentalizes girls’ material specificities in order to understand how power operates in their daily lives. In my research, I employ elements of feminist standpoint theory to privilege girls’ experiences and perspectives while simultaneously recognizing that their marginality is not unmarked by power. Girls have important stories to tell and experiences to share; yet their girlhoods reflect different “modalities of power” (Gonick 2003: 10) specified by socio-cultural and geopolitical moments. In other words, “girls become girls by participating within the available sets of social meanings and practices – the discourses which define them as girls” (Gonick 2003; 5). Yet I would argue research on girls nevertheless counters powerful knowledge hierarchies in the insistence that girls’ intersectional voices and experiences matter. In my work for example I endeavor to offer an account of girls as complex subjects both

¹ Bent, E. (2016). Making it up: Intergenerational activism and the ethics of empowering girls. *Girlhood Studies* 9(3), 105-121.

regulated by and resistant to the discursive and material conditions of their everyday lives. It is here at the crossroads of voice, discourse, and materiality that I suggest transformative research and practice is possible.

What are some examples of research practices that promote and enact a socially just and transformative ethos anchored by an ethics of engagement between researcher and the researched?

Over the last decade, we have witnessed an increasing interest in the power of adolescent girls to advance international development agendas from United Nations member states and agencies to multinational corporations. “Rooted in the logic of exceptionality” (Hesford 2014: 142), the promise of girls empowerment celebrates what Projansky (2014) calls “spectacular girlhoods” - a practice which almost instantaneously erases the socio-cultural and geopolitical support systems that make girls’ exceptionality possible. Empowered girls require mentorship and support from adults, fellow activists, and other young people, as well as communities and organizations driven by similar visions of transformation. Therefore as a critical first step in anchoring a more socially just and transformative ethos to an ethics of engagement, girlhood scholars and policy makers might begin with resisting narratives of the singular spectacular girl in order to make intergenerational partnerships, networks, and activist relationships visible. Visibility allows us to speak more broadly about the ethical tensions and conflicts in research. It exposes hierarchical power structures and competing interests in the relationship between researcher and the researched, and in turn challenges us to bring further transparency to the research process. This practice also prioritizes the communities, partnerships, and networks that foster social justice in our daily lives rather than promote singular individuals as the source of transformative change.

In my current research project on girls’ experiences of UN politics, I have developed meaningful relationships with the girl-activists that I both study and partner with to advance girls’ rights. Some girls spend a period of nine months or more working with me to organize girl-centered events at the UN. As an activist and scholar interested in feminist girlhoods, this engagement with girl-activists for extended periods of time and across different settings brings me more fully into their political lives. It also builds relational rapport and shared understanding in our activist projects. These same intergenerational relationships likewise blur the relational boundaries of my research, with girl-activists having a vested interest in research outcomes, findings, and dissemination. Girls have read draft journal articles and book chapters providing me with feedback and insight on what might be missing. I have spoken with them about emerging conceptual threads and they have (re)interpreted interview data from their perspective. In addition, we have utilized research findings to shape panel discussions, meetings, and organizational goals during critical UN sessions. Partnering with girls in this way, I suggest, transforms the research relationship to promote a socially just ethics of engagement. Together, these research practices strengthen the relationship between researcher and the researched as well as between adult-activist and girl-activist.

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