

BLACK LIVES MATTER, INTERSECTIONALITY, AND LGBTQ RIGHTS NOW

Monique Perry, Ph.D. Student, University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education

Abstract:

This article is a reflective piece that draws from local experience, historical, and educational literature. I argue the ways in which intersectionality can support analyses in the local uprisings for the Black Lives Matter movement in Philadelphia. Some uprisings, focused on anti-Black state violence linkages to schools and approaches to education. Toward this goal, this article explores how as a normative theory and analytical approach, *intersectionality* can strengthen aims for LGBTQ rights and educational equity.

Keywords: Black Lives Matter, intersectionality, LGBTQ, organizing

**Save Black Schools
LGBTQ Lives Matter
Fund Counselors Not Cops
Black Lives Matter
Trans Queer Young Poor Black Lives Matter. ALL Black Lives Matters**

These were the words written across some of the signs at the Educators and Students March for Black Lives and the Youth March for Black Lives during recent uprisings in Philadelphia. Activists marched in the streets with signs and yelled chants like “No justice! No peace! No racist police!” Despite 98-degree weather and having to wear masks for COVID-19 precaution, activists continued their chants and marched on toward City Hall and the administrative offices of the School District of Philadelphia (SDP). The speeches given by school staff, parents, and students focused on their experiences within schooling systems—concerns about public health, safety, building conditions, policing—and a host of demands that organizers would like to see applied across the SDP.

As an organizer with the Black Lives Matter Philadelphia chapter (BLM Philly), I have attended at least ten actions since May but there have been many more across the city. Prior to this summer, there has been consistent organizing work across the BLM Global Network despite whether much of that work has been covered in mainstream media. I would like to focus on some of the uprisings focused on educational transformation, including the action where I gave a speech due to my roles as a BLM Philly organizer and as a current graduate student. The Youth March for Black Lives was largely organized by high school students and over 20 partnership organizations from colleges to community grassroots organizations.

Due to these experiences, this article explores how discourse in these actions—chants signage, demands, and speech—are called upon or can be called upon to utilize intersectionality analyses. I argue intersectionality is a useful analytical and organizing tool for education practitioners working toward the aims of equity. First, this paper will review history about the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). Second, I consider how intersectionality can be defined and will be utilized in this context for analysis. Third, I review the goals of two education-focused actions and discuss linkages between this local organizing, national organizing, and LGBTQ rights. I am focusing on these two actions because I was a participant in those actions. I explore meanings in the chants, signage, and parts of my own speech given at the Youth March for Black Lives along with local demands given during the speeches by other students and educators. The intention is not to provide a totalizing discourse analysis of these actions but to reflect in a way that will allow other educators, researchers, and student organizers to consider or reconsider the affordances of intersectionality.

As a reflective piece, I believe it is important to state my positionality as a Black queer scholar, organizer, and activist. I have a direct bias towards aims for social change including in educational research reflected in this statement: When asked recently as to why I decided to run for a steering seat in the Caucus of Working Educators (WE) two years ago, I answered that I believe theory should be tied to action. I want to continue to organize alongside students and teachers and create sustained relationships. Whether it is in a participatory or a critical approach, the intention is to highlight collective approaches to my work in the academy, to complicate narratives, and to increase accountability. In this piece my goal is not to represent any organizing groups, but, rather, to consider how intersectionality as a normative theory and analytical approach can help to guide my work and the work of others interested in transformative approaches in education and research.

BLM Network and BLM Philly

Philadelphia has a long history of Black liberation activism and student activism, so this summer was not the onset of those efforts. Similarly, Philadelphia among many other cities in the United States experienced an increase in uprisings after the video footage of George Floyd's murder circulated on May 25th, showing Floyd pleading for police officers to release their hold upon this Black man's neck. As the video of Floyd's murder spread, so did the visibility of other uprisings and other stories including stories which originally got less media attention. Stories like that of Tony McDade, a Black transgender man who was fatally shot by Tallahassee police two days after Floyd's murder. Two months prior, Breonna Taylor, a Black woman, was shot and killed on May 13th by Louisville Metro Police Department officers. It is not a challenge to find examples of state violence against Black people in the United States and arguably across the globe. It is more challenging to see an elevation of these stories in a way that allows for nuance and connectivity, while still aiming toward an end to pervasive anti-Blackness. Many activists in the movement for Black Lives (M4BL) including the Black Lives Matter (BLM) network/ movement have worked toward these aims.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) is a global networked organization and a decentralized movement that has highlighted police brutality and criminalization of Black folks (Mayorga & Picower, 2018). The Philadelphia chapter of the BLM was established in 2015 after local organizers, Azsherae Gary and Taylor Johnson-Gordon, had been to Ferguson, Missouri to demand justice after the murder of Mike Brown. Founded by three queer women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi, the BLM network and movement also works to connect global struggles of Black folks by organizing and highlighting how oppressive systems target and continue to threaten Black girls, women, femmes, transgender, and gender nonconforming people (Lindsey, 2018; Taylor, 2017). This is important when we think about which stories are told and positioned as worth fighting for and what encourages people to take to the streets to demand systemic change.

The BLM movement goals are especially relevant in educational discussions, as schools are not at all immune to the systemic hold of White supremacy that fuels criminalization of Black students and exacerbates violence against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) students (Truong, Zongrone, & Kosciw, 2020). Groups of educators, parents, and students across the U.S. have participated in the Black Lives Matter at School movement which originated from a day of action in Seattle, Washington in the fall of 2016 but was formalized to a week of action in Philadelphia in 2017.

Later that same year, Philly educators from the Racial Justice Organizing Committee of WE attended the Free Minds, Free People conference in Baltimore that facilitated a national coalition. BLM at School became a national coalition with several other organizing groups joining in participation across the United States. While BLM at School organizers included BLM Philly members, like me, this work emerged from teacher organizers, students, and community activists within and outside of the BLM network. Currently, BLM at School is a Black-led coalition. The BLM at School coalition utilizes the 13 guiding principles of the BLM Network as inspiration in organizing approaches toward national and local demands. There are four central national demands of the BLM at School coalition: (1) end zero tolerance policies and approaches; (2) mandate Black history; (3) hire Black teachers; (4) fund counselors not cops. The BLM at School organizing efforts in Philadelphia have led to demands that align with national demands. In order to consider the offerings of an intersectional framework on local demands and uprisings it first requires some history and background on intersectionality.

Understanding Intersectionality

Black feminist scholars—Audre Lorde, Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins—have long critiqued the exclusionary ways feminism ignores race (Collins, 1986, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1981; Taylor, 2017). Intersectionality emerges from a feminist scholarship history from many women of color although Kimberlé Crenshaw created the term. Crenshaw's work has largely increased public and academic conversations around intersectionality. Crenshaw (1991) argues how there is a misguided application of feminist theory and misunderstandings about the limits of identity politics. Thus, she offers that intersectionality is an analytical tool or a better framework to address some of those issues. Crenshaw also admits and cautions that intersectionality is not a totalizing theory of identity.

In *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*, Angela Davis argues the insistence of intersectionality because of its potential to bring movements together (Davis, 2015). Davis and other scholars like Bettina Love warn of erasing essential histories of activism due to the emergence of intersectionality as a term in the academic spaces (Davis, 2015; Love, 2019). When discussing the history of intersectionality, political discourse, and the origins of the Combahee River Collective (CRC), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) emphasizes “the CRC did articulate the analysis that animates the meaning of intersectionality, the idea that multiple oppressions reinforce each other to create new categories of suffering” (p. 4). Similarly, Taylor notes the importance of acknowledging the long history of scholarship around intersectionality and the specific role of the work of the CRC. The CRC was a huge influence in showing intersectionality outside of legal studies and mainstream white feminism.

Toward the goal of reconciliation and knowledge building, intersectionality is often seen as a way to expand on differences, but it would arguably be intellectually lazy to think a recognition of differences is the key to understanding intersectionality. Ange-Marie Hancock argues to consider intersectionality as a normative theory and empirical research paradigm (Hancock, 2019; 2007). To be clear, intersectionality is not an additive measure, a stand in for race or difference although the historical

approaches in content specialization aimed for subjectivity and inclusion might suggest such. The intersections of race, gender, class and sexual orientation aimed to support ignored populations in earlier scholarly approaches (Hancock, 2019; Taylor, 2017). Yet, intersectionality has expanded beyond questions of difference and content specialization—it is misleading to characterize intersectionality largely in this way—especially as it aims to consider power analysis and distributive justice (Hancock 2007, Crenshaw, 1991). In this article, intersectionality is a normative theory guiding questions around approaches to local uprisings pushing for education equity.

Intersectionality is a useful analytical tool to understand uprisings in the movement for Black lives. While a gendered frame has not been left out of the guiding principles of Black Lives Matter movement or uprisings in Philadelphia, evident in the #SayHERName March; it is fair to ask whether there has been a consistent intersectional analysis or what intersectionality might offer in more educational contexts.

Lindsey (2018) argues consistency is one of the challenges with intersectional approaches. While intersectional fluidity is useful, it is largely dependent on specific contexts. Similarly, Hancock warns of the use of intersectionality that narrows questions of identity influence (2019). Crenshaw argues greater clarity can be gained by looking at intersectionality in three major domains: structural intersectionality, political intersectionality, and representative intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Structural intersectionality informs on systems of dominance and ways there is an inability to obtain legal remedy. Political intersectionality highlights a lack of comprehensiveness in response or remedy when the focus is on a single group for policy. Representative intersectionality informs us of the ways people straddle multiple social locations made by cultural construction and discourse (Hancock, 2019).

While Crenshaw has a legal background and introduced much of intersectionality around operations within legal systems, it should be noted that intersectionality has been utilized across disciplines including Education (Gadsden, 2017; Zwiwer & Grant, 2014). In a broad sense, intersectionality analytically allows education scholars to step away from silos based on discipline and identity categories. In terms of pedagogical approaches, it opens the door for educators and students to name the impact and harm caused by systems of domination.

Naming the systematic impact of racism, sexism, cissexism, classism, and ableism among many, allows for more students and school staff to be seen and heard. Teachers, students and researchers can then better address the experience of all students. It is important to highlight, intersectionality's history with feminism and what the authorship by Black femmes and women has meant as it has consistently been critiqued as too radical or co-opted, with its history of scholarship ignored in many ways. A better understanding of history can give ways to conceptualize intersectionality and can lead to stronger scholarship whether in pedagogy or methodology for educators, organizers, and researchers. For clarity, this next section uses the domains of intersectionality as frameworks for analyses around educational discourse and local BLM organizing goals.

Demands, Pedagogy, and Discourse

It may not be difficult to see how the national BLM at School demands might be analyzed under three domains of intersectionality. You could ask questions about structural Intersectionality and investigate an end to zero tolerance and policing or perhaps the demand to fund counselors instead of cops. One could also look at the demands to end zero tolerance or the Black history mandate within the domain of political intersectionality. You could also examine the retention and hiring of Black teachers and the Black history mandate under the domain of representative intersectionality. Yet, it might be harder to map onto local demands by educators and students as there are simply many more of them. While the local demands from the Philadelphia Educators and Students March align in many ways with the nation BLM at School coalition, some are very specific to SDP.

Organizers for the Educators and Students March for Black Lives announced ten demands for radical education transformation in the SDP. The demands range from more culturally and trauma responsive pedagogy in schools, to ethnic studies and African American history in K-12 education to an endorsement of BLM at School by the Philadelphia school board. For brevity, I will focus on just demand four which states “Trans, queer, and gender non-conforming students and staff must be affirmed in their expression and protected from discrimination. Full implementation of Policy 252 at every level including ongoing training for all school leaders and staff members.” The language of this demand seems to align more with a specific group but the actual development of SDP’s Policy 252 is based on an intersectional policy logic (Baker, Hillier, & Perry, 2020). It does mandate that students have access to restrooms based on their gender identity, but it also unties gender when it focuses on the individual desire for privacy for any student. Single-lens legislation can reaffirm the gender binary when it demands compliance from students to use spaces linked with their sex assigned at birth or only protects trans/GNC students by demanding their right to certain spaces. Policy 252 places students at the center of the approach with the anchor of privacy. In this way, we can understand local demand four within an intersectional political approach as it attends to school district policy.

Another area of connection between intersectionality and demand four can be found in the title and goals of the actions as both were called marches for Black lives. Black queer students and staff members can be seen in a way that does not say their

experience with racism is the same way they might experience cissexism, or heterosexism. An intersectional frame acknowledges their gendered, racialized, and sexualized experiences matter and may matter in different ways. While there is a fair argument about the central point of race in these marches, what may be missed is the opportunity to look at specific attempts to avoid totalizing racial experiences of Black students and staff.

In many ways, being asked to speak as a Black queer student and educator among many other students and educators highlights to others the importance of our storytelling of many experiences. The organizers of the Youth March for Black Lives, held an open mic asking partners or other students to share and utilize the platform open to them. During my speech I said, “They want you to believe Policy 252 is a policy to support transgender & gender nonconforming students in the district and it does but it also gives rights to ALL students in the district.” Policy 252 is also something educators, students, and researchers should know about not just to understand student rights but its implications for the rights for LGBTQ educators and school staff in the Philadelphia School District as well. Educational researchers outside of Philadelphia might familiarize themselves with Policy 252 to consider local approaches in their own districts. These were areas in my speech I failed to mention and thus could have utilized or called upon a more political or representative intersectional approach. In efforts to meet the demands and respond to recent research about training and implementation of Policy 252, SDP has to consider additional rounds of training among all school personnel around Policy 252 (Baker et al., 2020). School staff can utilize their own agency to perform gender audits of their sites. Davis (2017) argues to really support policy redesign, organizations should use gender audits to see how their organizations invoke sex in formal and informal ways. Educators might ask themselves, if they have a pedagogical reason for separating students by sex in their classroom activity. Administrators might ask themselves if they have met the professional development needs of their school staff in order to implement the policy to foster high competence and implementation.

In efforts to highlight intersectionality, I read a passage from the Combahee River Collective (CRC) Statement during my speech.

“I also want to spend some time talking about strategy as we approach our work towards liberation. I'm going to read part of the opening statement from the Combahee River Collective. “We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974. During that time, we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives.”

I was particularly interested in setting up my critique about sexism, transphobia, racism and classism and saw an opportunity to invoke the power of intersectionality from this historical document. Additionally, I wanted to respond in critique of the erasure of scholarship by acknowledging this work existed and how it can support our understanding of the educational world today.

Educators do not have to attend a march and talk about Black feminist history –although I would encourage it, but I digress— instead they can use the CRC’s work in their classroom approaches. Students can investigate the work of Black queer activists and scholars across subjects including the CRC statement itself and can consider pairing it with materials and lessons from Zinn Education Project on Black Feminist Organizing from 1950s-21st century or Stanford History Education Group on Civil Rights Era. Educators and researchers unsure where to begin might simply start seeking to understand the experiences of Black LGBTQ students. Listening to the publicly accessible student speeches from these marches is one way, or also reading about student experiences in GLSEN’s 2020 Erasure and Resilience report on LGBTQ students of color. In one of a four-part series, GLSEN reports over half of the Black LGBTQ students (51.6%) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 40.2% because of their gender expression, and 30.6% because of their race or ethnicity (Truong et al., 2020).

Transformative approaches to education are imperative for safer school environments as existing curricula often lack positive examples of queer relationships, and curricula are frequently gendered and racialized in ways that can isolate and exacerbate violence among Black queer youth. Consider how representative intersectionality allows reframing of the types of questions we might be asking around experiences of Black LGBTQ students. Instead of asking about physical violence among all students, *What happens when we parse out sexual violence among gender diverse group of students? How do students see themselves in curricula and what might an absence of representation imply? If you agree the hidden curriculum is as important as the formal curriculum, how might it operate in a gendered, racialized, and classed way? What does the hidden curriculum say about the possibilities that students can imagine for themselves?*

One final note on the discourse, I did not directly quote other public speeches besides my own as this was not a study and I did not get permission from speakers to use their quotes. I know there are debates about access and the use of public data and information but as someone who is organizing within these groups, I feel compelled to honor collective accountability. I might actually make the same argument, to consider the ethics, for scholars who are not organizing or doing ethnographic work when

faced with decisions about open facing data.

The following analysis about chants were made by large groups and does not single out one speaker. Some of the chants during the actions were utilized as a way for educators and students to call on structural critique of violence against Black folks but also a way to see themselves.

Black lives matter!

Say her name!

Breonna Taylor!

Say his name!

George Floyd!

Say their names!

George Floyd!

While this seems to be an inclusive approach to discourse during the local actions, intersectionality could be called upon to challenge some of this discourse. Say Her Name emerged as a campaign by the African American Policy Forum (AAPF), a group co-founded by Kimberlé Crenshaw and Luke Harris. Say Her Name intentionally highlights the stories of Black women, femmes, & girls killed by police. Crenshaw argues this has been left out of national media conversations (Kelly & Glenn, 2020). National media conversations and organizing included stories of Philando Castile, Eric Garner, and George Floyd. Treva Lindsey (2018) argues that despite the intention to look at anti-Black violence regardless of gender identity, the mainstream media still focuses on men and boys. #SayHerName was a direct response and rejections of that central focus that ignores the ways anti-Black girl racial-gender terror. Lindsey argues, "The classroom alone cannot demolish anti-Black girl racial-gender terror, but it can divest from the ideologies, practices, and stereotypes that stem from White supremacist and patriarchal histories and logics" (p. 169). Lindsey makes connections to schools and calls upon structural and political intersectionality to acknowledge limits and possibilities for schools. Black women, femmes, and girls do thrive and push back against this terror, but intersectionality does allow acknowledgement of the real experiences of violence in schooling institutions.

On the ways trans/GNC people are seen, Davis points out there is little scrutiny of his presence (Davis, 2018). He argues his ability to make decisions as a transgender man is linked to the way women's gender choices are scrutinized and policed much more. Additionally, Davis applies an intersectional approach by pointing out how racial perceptions are often tied to how sex identities are publicly perceived. Say Her Name is an intersectional reminder to consider gender, transphobia, racism, and sexism in police terror. Say His Name is arguably a dismissive way of saying state terror against Black girls, femmes, trans/GNC, and women does not exist or should not be prioritized. Activists push back against challenges to chant all lives matter and it is not because Black lives matter more. Black lives matter is a call to pay attention to experiences particularly of Black folks. Similarly, Say Her Name does not mean that people who do not identify as a women, femmes, trans/GNC, or girls have less valuable lives. Oppressive experiences within systems of domination does not eliminate one's, even activists with aims for equity, ability to reify those systems. Black folks can still uphold systems of domination and practices like misogynoir, anti-racist misogyny experience by Black women (Bailey & Trudy, 2018). This is why even among the local demand to hire and retain Black educators in Philadelphia, there is a demand for anti-racist training for every educator. Philadelphia has a school district where more than 50% of the students are Black. It is critical for educators to remove assumptions that their identities or politics prevents them from possibly supporting systems that criminalize Black students. Say Her Name is a call to discuss and respond to gendered and racialized terror in education. Lastly, on my experience during the education focused marches. There were clear levels of representative intersectionality when organizers yelled Say Her Name! Activists responded by saying the name of Dominique "Rem'mie" Fells, a Black transgender woman murdered in Philadelphia. Fells' body was found in June this year. It is important demand trans literacy in calls for action and curriculum in schools as trans/GNC people experience some of the highest rates of sexual and physical violence and experience higher rates of anti-LGBT harassment than cisgender students (Truong et al., 2020).

Looking for the Future

Intersectionality can allow for a more expansive examination of educational organizing goals like the full implementation of Policy 252. A political intersectional framework allows expansiveness in student rights including an expansiveness in trans/GNC rights.

Intersectionality also serves to help researchers and education practitioners reframe research questions and reimagine pedagogical approaches. *How are Black LGBTQ students represented in curricula and how are they experiencing curricula?* The practice of naming systems of domination from a structural and representative approach allows a deeper support system for student experiences by guarding against identity silos and essentializing research and curriculum. Student and teacher organizers can utilize intersectionality to increase and challenge their own sociopolitical understandings of the world. They can push to address attacks on curriculum development that try to hide or limit education on social inequality. If organizers are unable to see how the Black Lives Matter movement and schooling systems are connected, it will be easier to focus on perceived deficits of students instead of the entanglements of power, counter-narratives, and liberatory approaches to curriculum development.

In critique, intersectionality might seem to be suggesting less value for other theoretical approaches that do focus on a central or collective identity component like critical race theory (CRT). Despite the fact that intersectionality is not race centered, CRT should not be undervalued or its cross influence with intersectionality. Zeus Leonardo (2013) warns of the co-opting of intersectionality to avoid research and conversations on race. Thus, it is up to education practitioners and researchers to be forthright about the open-ended questions, affordances, and limits of their work. For example, there is a serious argument to be made about how race and class relate to the access of resources among Philadelphia students. Both CRT or intersectionality would have much to add to that conversation as the impact of socioeconomic status on academic outcomes should be examined. The affordability of intersectionality is that it can, for example, readily help investigate student homelessness by allowing class, gender, sexuality, and race to be examined. This highlights the struggles of Black trans students to secure housing which might actually be central to understanding sustainable housing solutions and improved academic participation.

It is even more important to openly and strongly support intersectionality approaches not because it is without critique but many of the recent critiques seek to derail the efforts toward the BLM movement. Intersectionality is not about a heightened version of victimization or identity politics. It is not just looking at additive experiences or axis points. Intersectionality actively challenges us to consider power dynamics, and to comprehensively honor lived experiences. It would be fair to ask how we can utilize intersectionality to tell more liberatory dreams. Edwin and Picower (2018) argue teacher education should be operating in solidarity with the BLM movement. This means active practices where we recognize differences and delve into the tension to work through these differences with an expressed aim of liberation for us and others. One final note of liberatory goals and gains, the School Board of Philadelphia has finally endorsed BLM at School. Now, it is up to all of us that believe in transformative education to leverage that endorsement for collective accountability.

Monique Perry is a Ph.D. student in Teaching and Learning at Penn GSE. They earned an M.S.Ed. with a concentration in community action and social change. They recently completed a graduate certificate in Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies. Research interests include school violence, teacher education, gender, sexuality, and mixed methods research.

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