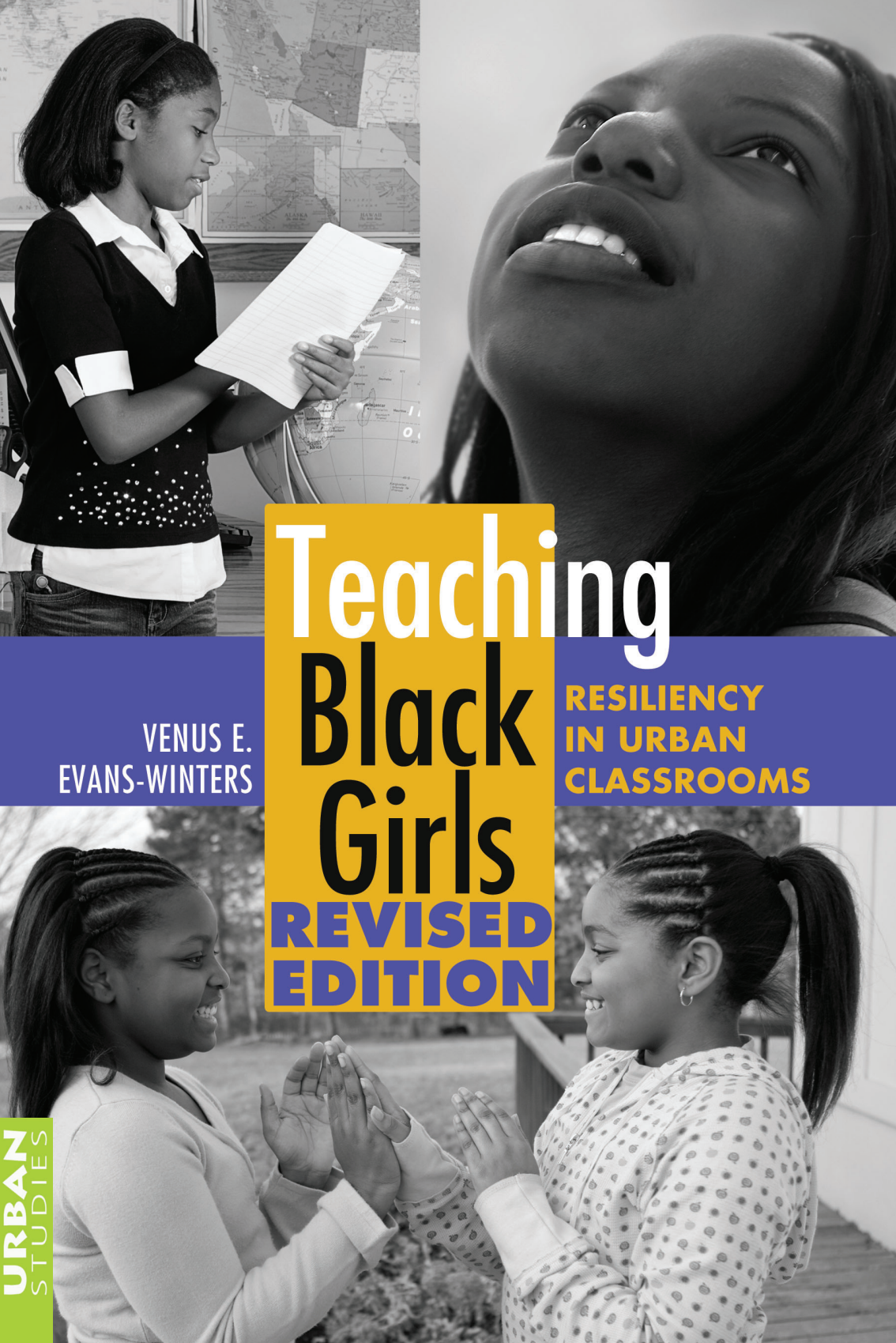

Teaching Black Girls

RESILIENCY IN URBAN CLASSROOMS

REVISED EDITION

VENUS E. EVANS-WINTERS

URBAN STUDIES

In this updated volume of *Teaching Black Girls: Resiliency in Urban Classrooms*, Venus E. Evans-Winters uses qualitative research methods to interpret and discuss school resilience in the lives of African American female students. The book demonstrates how these girls are simultaneously one of the most vulnerable, and one of the most resilient group of students. *Teaching Black Girls* implements alternative approaches to the study of the intersection of race, class, and gender on schooling, deliberately highlighting how students growing up and attending schools in urban neighborhoods are educationally resilient in the face of adversity. Through dialogue and self-reflection, the author and participants in the ethnographic study documented here reconstruct and tell stories of resilience to derive practice that is both gender and culturally relevant. *Teaching Black Girls* has research and practice implications for graduate students, advanced pre-service teachers, and school practitioners.

Venus E. Evans-Winters is Assistant Professor of Education at Illinois State University in the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations. She holds a Doctorate degree in educational policy studies and a Masters degree in school social work from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests are school resilience, urban education, critical race theory, critical pedagogy, and feminism(s).

PRAISE FOR THE FIRST EDITION OF

Teaching Black Girls

"*Teaching Black Girls* is told by a voice so rich in character that it challenges us to deal effectively with the intersections of race, gender, and class. Through richly intertwined personal narratives we are reminded or introduced to what it is like growing up as an African American female. The voices of these resilient students stand out among the common discourse in which educational policies are too often based. This book should be a vital resource for teachers, educational administrators, university faculty, and policy makers who are change agents within urban schools."

—Dawn G. Williams, Professor of Educational Administration, Howard University

"*Teaching Black Girls* is a beautifully written ethnography that performs what it promises. Namely, Venus E. Evans-Winters challenges the reader to redefine resiliency for African American girls as hybrid and participatory. Utilizing 'Black Womanist' thinking, Evans-Winters develops critiques that are as complex as the lives of the girls she portrays, and compellingly argues we are all responsible for and to the resiliency of youth."

—Wanda Pillow, Professor of Educational Policy Studies, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Teaching Black Girls

Studies in the Postmodern Theory of Education

Shirley R. Steinberg
General Editor

Vol. 279

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New York • Washington, D.C./Baltimore • Bern
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Venus E. Evans-Winters

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My body of work is dedicated to our ancestors,
for their vision of our future.
And, the book is dedicated to our future:
Glyndae, Blake, Destini, Tammika, and Serena.

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endearing support of my in-laws, Mr. and Mrs. Winters. Thank you for supporting our family through my long hours at the office, writing, researching, and reflecting on the aforementioned. The dinners in Ziploc containers were also very helpful to this unlikely scholar struggling to balance home and work life.

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Introduction

In a recent visit to South Africa, a group of educational researchers, practitioners, and policymakers visited various educational programs, which included colleges and universities, distant learning programs, elementary and secondary schools. After visiting the different school environments, observing students and talking to faculty, I further learned the importance of understanding the local culture in which learners experience schooling as well as the significance of individual, group, community and national identity shapes students' schooling. In South Africa a learner's education is influenced by family dynamics, where a girl's family lives, and her family's ethnic and identity. In some cases, even a young woman's tribal identity shapes her perceptions and experiences in school.

Only fifteen years post-apartheid, a young woman's family's ethnic and racial identity dictates where the student lives and the type of schooling she will have access to throughout childhood. In South Africa, within one local Black community, or more accurately, township, a young girl may be exposed to three or four different languages before she enters formal education. South Africa has eleven official national languages, with many Black children speaking multiple languages. A Black South African girl's education is shaped by skin color, ethnic or tribal affiliation, class status, languages spoken (or not spoken) and residential location. As a result of grassroots activism, national and international political and economic efforts to erase the pain and deleterious effects of decades of apartheid in residential living and schooling, today South African Black girls are more likely to be educated by Black teachers, receive education in multiple languages (including their home language), have access to neighborhood schools, and to view images of herself in mainstream media. Although I made many lively and fascinating observations from my South Africa cultural excursions and school visits, one significant and more than relevant observation made was that Black girls around the globe tend to share similar realities of racial and residential segregation left over from years of institutionalized racism and sexism. Black girls and young women around the globe encounter White power domination in economic and political structures.

Race, class, and gender oppression influences how and where Black girls' families live. Their oppression is noted by constant exposure to idealized images of White European beauty, exclusion from high quality instruction and curriculum, over-

crowded and underfunded schools, and the absence of gender and culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogical strategies. Since the first publishing of this book, the social and educational conditions affecting U.S. Black girls educational development has not changed significantly. Some may even argue the educational challenges confronting Black girls have actually worsened.

Educational policies like zero tolerance policies in schools, standardized curriculum and hyper-testing, urban school closings and consolidations have threatened the mental health, bodies, and economic opportunities available to many Black girls. Furthermore, Black girls' educational and career development is also threatened by social forces that occur outside of the school context, such as the globalization of the formal marketplace, the so-called war on drugs, lack of affordable quality healthcare and housing. However, most Black female students have been able to survive, adapt to, and challenge poor economic and social trends in their local environments. I believe the first edition of *Teaching Black Girls* was a success in higher education classrooms, in the teaching community, and with female-centered groups outside of academia, because many people appreciated how the book highlighted Black girls' resilience, alongside stories of vulnerability. I know for sure that many novice social science researchers committed to issues of racial and gender equity found the conceptual framework of post-womanism to speak volumes to their research sensibilities as womanists and critical multiculturalists.

In this book, together, me and the young women through their shared stories, acknowledge, celebrate, and challenge Black girls' humanity. And, as my mentor Joe Kincheloe once shared, in the book we are able to achieve our message in a tone and writing style that is accessible to both the scholarly community and general public. In the newer edition, I have attempted to keep the book accessible to a diverse and differently invested audience, while also trying to preserve the authentic themes of the first edition. This edition includes more recent statistics and data on educational trends. Also, included in this edition is a new afterword that discusses new directions for theory and research on Black girls' education. Since writing *Teaching Black Girls,* I have had the privilege of discussing the book with many audiences. I have discussed the book with young women enrolled in public schools, pre-service teachers, veteran teachers, graduate students; and, early childhood educators, faculty of education, social workers, and community organization leaders.

One response to the book that has been clearly shared with me is that a book like *Teaching Black Girls* is way overdue, and it is definitely useful to the educational community at large. Most of those who I speak with wish there was a way to make the stories and policy implications discussed in the book required reading for all those who work directly or indirectly with girls of color. Due to the diversity in the schooling and lived experiences of Black girls, I am not sure that the book should become a

prescriptive curriculum for educators. No one book or author is an authority on the Black girl's experience.

However, I do know for sure that the book would make a valuable resource to begin a dialogue on the education of Black girls and what their educational achievement would mean to self-empowerment, community development, nation-building, and the education of girls globally. Thank you for the success of the first edition, and please enjoy this reading. Let us continue to imagine, educate, and struggle for our full humanity.

Chapter One

Where I'm Comin' From

> All over the country, the Black world was thrusting its girls and boys into the white world to represent the race. Intellectual inquiry became both our weapon and a political act requiring great courage because there were absolutely no role models or books and nothing to sustain us except the training and encouragement we received from our families and communities. (Omolade, 1994, p. xi)

> Ummm…short pause) I'm just trying to graduate, make something out of my life, because a lot of people in my family, they just like nothing. Just drink beer every day and stuff. And, I don't want to end up like them. I want to end up a better person, so I can do something with my life. (Yssis, a first-year high school student discussing her goals)

In private conversations, my close friends and I often compete to prove that one's own family is more dysfunctional than another's. An unspoken rule is that these stories never go beyond the conversation that it came up in, and the divulged information is never shared with others, not even other friends or family members. The family-dysfunction competition of family dysfunction over the years has included a range of stories about our immediate and extended family members, from the more "light-hearted" stories of disorderly drunkenness and arrest to the more serious stories of sexual innuendos. These gendered exchanges serve as a form of therapy for a group of individuals who feel that traditional therapy may not accommodate our experiences as women reared in African American families and communities. Also, we are a group of professional Black women who do not readily believe in airing our dirty laundry, which most of us deem to be a bigger social taboo than anything that could ever occur within the confines of our familial boundaries.

My most recent competition of "My family is more dysfunctional than yours" took place with a younger mentee. Usually one opponent will never admit that her challenger's family has caused more stress or complications to the confidante's life, but having heard her story on multiple occasions, I know that my life circumstances may not have been as difficult as my mentee's life. Nevertheless, the purpose of these exchanges is to serve as a form of positive reinforcement and pseudo-counseling for both

opponents. The underlining message of these sessions is that conditions and predicaments could have been much worse growing up, and there is always another woman who has overcome the various challenges one has experienced growing up, while other young women became stereotypical "baby mothers" or "crack heads." My mentee, who happened to be a young single parent, concluded that our positive outcomes had to be the work of something greater than we were, but she wanted my professional opinion in this matter, along with my wisdom as an "older" (I was only five years her senior) African American woman who had "made it."

The young single mother's inquisition forced me to take an even closer look at this idea of resilience and African American girls. It seems Black women also want to know *why* some Black girls blossom in the face of adversity, while other young women remain in segregated downtrodden communities and wither in the storm. My counterpart chose to attribute success and failure to a higher being, for in her mind only divine intervention could explain *why* Black girls miraculously overcome some of the hardships that we experience. In all honesty, I was not intellectually willing to give up on millions of Black urban girls, by attributing my own resilience to some restricted private connection to a higher being. Her question is one I have been pondering for years, but it is easier to observe and examine *how* girls succeed versus *why* girls are resilient in the face of adversity. *How* questions attempt to analyze the processes that lead to resiliency; therefore, in addition to looking at supports we will also be required to "air dirty laundry." Sharing hardships becomes difficult because many children are taught at home not to share family business and happenings with outsiders. However, I told my young counterpart about my research work on girls and resiliency and suggested to her that maybe we both should reexamine the supports and setbacks in our own lives that may have contributed to our "making it." I explained that if these things could be identified and operationalized for research and practice reasons, then just maybe we could help other young women become more resilient.

Personal Reflections: An Urban Girl's Story

As a young girl, I attended high school in a majority Black low-income and working-class neighborhood. Young people were taught early that education opened doors to social and economic opportunities. The motto over the entrance of my high school read: Education is the key to success. Although we all received the same message on the importance of education, all of us did not overcome many of the social barriers that affect school achievement. Many students struggled with issues of poverty, violence, drug and alcohol abuse at home, in the neighborhood, or at school itself. Some girls got pregnant; some boys went to jail for selling drugs; some students even experimented with drugs, and other students did not make it out of the ghetto alive.

Yet, the majority of us made it through school and realized that schooling, like our families and neighborhoods, could be both a barrier and a hurdle. Students who stayed in school survived those barriers that were related to our race, class, and gender with the support of the people and material resources around us. When reflecting on my own schooling experience, I realize that my family, the African American community, and adults at school played a major role in my personal and educational development. My teachers, godparents, grandparents, the church, successful adults, and others encouraged me to be a strong-minded individual as well as the best student that I could be. Students learned that we did not need privilege on our side to succeed at schooling, simply courage and endurance. Girls were told that with a good education you "won't have to depend on no man," and that "white folks can't deny you anything with an education." In other words, education was promoted as an opportunity to open doors and to battle the inequalities present in our daily lives. Thus, most of us struggled through racism, sexism, and classism at home, school, and in our neighborhoods and against larger forces outside our communities and completed school successfully.

Far from Home

However, in my Masters of Social Work program, I found that most of the literature on African American female students focused on pathology and deficits, like school dropout and teenage pregnancy rates. Besides the discovery that the abundance of research on Black girls is focused on social problems, I also learned that African American girls were also absent from the school resiliency literature. The school resiliency literature focused on adolescents or minorities overall, ignoring the influence of the interaction of race, class, and gender on students' vulnerabilities and strengths. African American girls' absence from the resiliency literature presented a challenge as well as an opportunity. The challenge related to the observation that not much research was available that focused on the positive outcomes of African American students, nor were there many studies available that examined the process by which school success is accomplished in the face of adversity. My personal experiences obviously contradicted what I was learning in my graduate studies, for I knew that the majority of African American girls were not high school dropouts or teenage mothers. The problem was that there were not enough educational or social science research studies, in general, available to support my claims.

The absence of African American girls in the resiliency literature presented the opportunity to fill a gap in the educational literature and to implement alternative theoretical approaches to the study of the interaction of race, class, and gender on educational experiences. For example, instead of looking at how students fail, *Teaching Black Girls* focuses on how students succeed and focuses on resiliency and resiliency-