Pedagogies and Practices of Teaching Girlhood Studies

Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh

Girlhood Studies, as an academic discipline, is continually growing. Since some educational institutions include girls’ studies as part of a special curriculum, an academic program, a certificate course, a minor, or as part of Women’s Studies or Gender Studies, Girlhood Studies has a presence in academia although at this stage rarely in an autonomous department. This interest in the pedagogies and practices of teaching Girlhood Studies is an important aspect of its growth as a field of study not only at the university level but also in other academic settings and outside of them, be they workshops, special programs for girls, and summer camps, among others. Depeding on these formal and informal educational contexts, the discussion of approaches to teaching Girlhood Studies ranges from the theoretical to those that outline hands-on projects that invite and promote the discussion of girlhood. As Claudia Mitchell (2021) states in her editorial “What can Girlhood Studies be?” the research and scholarly work in Girlhood Studies “stands as its own theoretical and practical area” (vi) that warrants its study and teaching and that prompted the production of this special issue on teaching Girlhood Studies.

So, what does it mean to teach Girlhood Studies? As the articles in this issue demonstrate, there is no one way to do so, and this multiplicity of possibilities allows for teaching and learning that can go beyond the confines of a physical classroom and reach audiences around the world and across a range of ages. For this special issue, we invited articles that address the teaching of Girlhood Studies in various contexts and through various approaches. Some of the work presented here delineates teaching about girlhood for and with girls, while other work draws on women’s own girlhood experiences to inform their teaching. These articles build on and address
some of the key questions that led to the creation of this journal: “What is girlhood studies? How do we do girlhood studies? What is the relationship between women’s studies and girlhood studies?” (Mitchell et al. 2008: ix).

We connect our special issue to the one that stemmed, in June 2021, from the International Girlhood Studies Association conference at the University of Notre Dame in 2019. In “Call-and-Response: Looking Outward from /with IGSA@ND” the three editors, Angeletta KM Gourdine, Mary Celeste Kearney, and Shauna Pomerantz critique the field of Girlhood Studies before and during the current Covid-19 pandemic. Near the end of their editorial, they state their hope that their special issue will instigate conversations, expand the boundaries, and critique the homogeneity of the field. We seek in this special issue on teaching Girlhood Studies to further these aims in relation to sharing some pedagogies and practices of this burgeoning field, especially when it comes to girls of color. Girlhood Studies is now taught at the university level, in high schools, and in informal settings. Since Covid-19, the modes of teaching are varied, so may be face-to-face, online, or hybrid.

When we were approached to serve as guest co-editors of a special issue on teaching Girlhood Studies, we thought it was a perfect fit for us. We write as two university teachers and researchers at different stages and positions in this dynamic field. Jacqui Reid-Walsh, a professor at Penn State University, has been teaching Girlhood Studies for many years. Emily Aguiló-Pérez, assistant professor at West Chester University of Pennsylvania, was one of Jacqui’s doctoral students studying girlhood. Although we are situated differently in terms of our relationship to the field, our trajectories, in some ways, mirror the trajectories and changes in the field of Girlhood Studies itself, and, more specifically, in teaching Girlhood Studies.

From her vantage point, Jacqui can see the growth and diversification of girl studies over the years as a valued field of research and study. This transformation has had an impact on the teaching of Girlhood Studies. The growth in the teaching of Girlhood Studies in different disciplines with different foci resembles, in some ways, the typical growth pattern of the rhizome given its horizontal underground stem that puts forth shoots and roots. Previously, topics dealing with girlhood were embedded in existing courses about women, like, for example those on women in education. Then these topics were included in courses on women’s studies in a different department. More recently teaching Girlhood Studies has emerged as a distinct field that is diversifying and expanding globally in its sending out both roots and stems.
Emily approaches teaching Girlhood Studies from the perspective of popular culture and the study of artifacts; these are approaches she first learned about from Jacqui. Specifically, she has worked with undergraduate students to teach Girlhood Studies through examining issues of gender, race, the body, class, capitalism, and femininity in relation to Barbie and other dolls. Students in her courses examine their own experiences with dolls and how dolls have influenced their own identity formation.

Both of us have, for instance, employed critical making and re-making like, for example, remaking board games, magazines, and puzzles as well as making zines and deconstructing Barbie to get students to analyze some artifacts of girlhood and examine ways of challenging and disrupting ideologies about what girlhood is and/or what it is not. Our teaching practices showcase different ways through which Girlhood Studies can be taught in relation to various topics, pedagogical approaches, settings, disciplines, and modes of communication.

While our teaching experiences had been mostly in face-to-face classroom settings, the Covid-19 pandemic forced us, as it did so many in educational settings, to ask ourselves two questions: “How do we create community and safe spaces in a virtual world?” and “How will the fully online experience affect the pedagogies?” We were both teaching Girlhood Studies in spring, 2020, when the courses switched suddenly to remote teaching and learning. The hybrid format was a response to an unusual situation and our respective experiences teaching during Covid-19 and the unexpected results of the shift to virtual mode allowed us to perceive teaching in broader ways. To Jacqui, the experience of teaching a graduate course in a zoom world once a week enabled a much-needed connection to be made, with its attendant sociability occurring among the students since we were all isolated in our homes. A tight community emerged as a result, one that has, in many cases, created lasting friendships. For Emily’s students, the “Barbie course” (as they referred to it) was already a space of camaraderie in which they all felt safe sharing their experiences. With the sudden move to online learning and the isolation from in-person social interactions, the class became even more crucial to the development of community for her students. Given what they learned and experienced, both Jacqui and Emily were able to redesign their subsequent Girlhood Studies courses, in both face-to-face and in online settings, to create a similar sense of community as the previous iterations had fostered.

Of course, this experience was not unique to us since so many academic situations suddenly had to be adapted to encompass the new normal
generated by the pandemic. As some of the articles in this special issue explore, we need to think of online spaces as positive environments where learning and activism can occur.

Contributions

In our call for proposals, we invited authors to consider some of the following questions about teaching girlhood studies:

- Why teach girlhood studies?
- Are there girlhood pedagogies?
- Are girlhood pedagogies also feminist pedagogies?
- Do all feminist pedagogies encompass girls?
- Are we working with girls as equal participants in teaching and learning girlhood studies?
- What is the status of teaching girlhood studies and in what new directions should it go?
- How has the landscape for teaching girlhood studies changed?
- Who teaches girlhood studies?
- Who are students in girlhood studies?
- Whose voices are highlighted or whose are silenced?

The articles in this issue represent a variety of topics and consider different approaches and formats in relation to teaching Girlhood Studies. The first three articles in this issue center girls by disrupting adultism in their approaches to teaching Girlhood Studies, whether in virtual settings or in person. We begin with “Material Moments in Virtual Worlds: Creating Hybrid Spaces for Feminist Consciousness-raising.” Based on their ongoing work with Malaysian girls and young women, Syafiqah Abdul Rahim and Hannah Walters use a feminist new materialist perspective to examine how a hybrid setting, prompted by the need to shift to online teaching settings because of Covid-19, provided a safe space for girls to engage with feminism in meaningful ways and to feel a sense of connectedness to each other. Drawing from DIY cultures, craftivism, YouTube videos, and video chat, their hybrid setting is designed to bring a sense of real-world-ness and materiality to virtual environments.

The second article addresses the experiences of Black girls engaging with Girlhood Studies in an online setting. Cierra Kaler-Jones in “‘Defining Ourselves for Ourselves’: Black Girls Conceptualize Black Girlhood
Online,” explores the suggestions that adolescent Black girls provided for teaching and learning about Black girlhood, specifically in an online setting. Guided by her own questions, “How do we teach and simultaneously learn about girlhood through the lens of Black girls’ experiences to account for its depth and breadth?” and “What does it mean to create art and express girlhood in geography that transcends physical space into the digital realm?” Kaler-Jones discusses the tensions and possibilities of online environments in working with girls and she reflects on the power dynamics that may arise.

By contrast, in “‘Who Were You?: Temporality and Intergenerational Empathy in Community Girlhood Studies,” Sarah Winstanley and Alexe Bernier discuss programming that trains women to become volunteer mentors for girls. Their aim is to disrupt adultism and develop intergenerational empathy in the informal educational spaces of a women-only drop-in center. Instead of presenting the women as teachers and the girls as learners, they position the girls and women as peers. This meant that they were able to develop authentic and reciprocal relationships across age differences.

The next three articles engage with autoethnographic and autobiographical approaches to creating and teaching Girlhood Studies courses and examine women’s experiences as teachers and students of Girlhood Studies. Through narrative and performing writing, in “Teaching Black Girlhood Studies with Black Motherhood Studies: An Autoethnography,” Renata Ferdinand employs autoethnography to consider the ways in which the subjects of Black Girlhood Studies and Black Motherhood Studies can be explored together and in relation to each other. Similarly, Ashley L. Smith-Purviance, Sara Jackson, Brianna Harper, Jennifer Merandisse, Brittney Smith, Kim Hussey, and Eliana Lopez—a professor and six undergraduate students—draw on their personal experiences to exercise a collective rememorying. “Toward Black Girl Futures: Rememorying in Black Girlhood Studies” illustrates how recovering their girlhood memories helps the authors to shape “a collective rememorying process for Black women seeking to make their girlhood experiences legible.”

Tammy Owens draws from personal experience as a scholar and professor of Black Girlhood Studies to advocate for securing this as a crucial college course. She argues in “Teaching to Survive: Keeping Black Girls and Black Girlhood Studies on Campus” that scholars must institute many academic and disciplinary homes for Black Girlhood Studies especially in departments beyond Gender Studies and Black Studies in which Black girls might be the subject of research.
The last article uses an artifact-based approach to teaching Girlhood Studies in a university setting. Jen Almjeld in “Gen Ed Girlhood: Artifact-centric Approach Invites New Students to Girlhood Studies” discusses her unusual approach to a general education online course by taking a girl-centric approach to a wide range of texts that includes new media, toys, children’s books, and material culture such as T-shirts. At the same time, she introduces girlhood as a field of study for university students.

The report in our special issue, “Case Study: Art School Grrls Hack the Girl Culture,” by Melinda de Jesus is a case study that deals with zine making in her girl culture course at an American Art College. The project was initiated by the students who had studied other zine projects. Instead of writing a conventional essay, the class members, filled with creative excitement and political will, hacked their examination by creating a class zine. The report is illustrated with numerous examples of the girls’ productions created during the course and could motivate other instructors to engage in similar collective zine projects.


**Emergent Themes**

In this special issue we focused specifically on articles that engage with teaching Girlhood Studies. The explosion of courses, especially at the university level, and the range of their modes of instruction—face-to-face, online, and hybrid—attest to the vigor of the growth of the field. Similarly, the widening of including the teaching of Girlhood Studies in high schools and in community settings broadens the impact. As our special issue shows, while many courses on Girlhood Studies are taught in North America, the subject is beginning to have a global reach. This is evidenced by the first article that is about teaching girls in Malaysia. In North America, the issue demonstrates, especially with the cluster of articles about teaching Black Girlhood Studies at the university level, how the presence of girls of color in the classrooms is broadening the student population.
Understandably, there is so much more that can be addressed regarding teaching Girlhood Studies in relation to disability, sexuality, sexual orientation, climate change, globalization, gender violence, and other matters that affect girls worldwide. This is beyond the scope of a special issue. Yet, we hope that this one invites more publications about teaching Girlhood Studies with a specific focus on these and other important topics in this area of study.

Acknowledgments

We thank Claudia Mitchell, the editor-in-chief of *Girlhood Studies*, for the opportunity to guest edit this special issue and to the managing editor, Ann Smith, for her sage advice and guidance throughout the editorial process. We are grateful to the reviewers for reading and providing crucial feedback on the manuscripts, at times during the busiest moments of the semester and through the summer. Of course, we want to thank the contributors for their thoughtful work and their willingness to revise and make necessary changes sometimes within a short turnaround time.

Emily R. Aguiló-Pérez (she/her/hers) (ORCID: 0000-0001-5246-4585) is Assistant Professor of English at West Chester University of Pennsylvania. She specializes in children’s literature and culture, girlhood studies, and Latinx studies. Her monograph, *An American Icon in Puerto Rico: Barbie, Girlhood, and Colonialism at Play* (Berghahn 2022), examines girlhood as represented in Puerto Rican girls’ identity formation with Barbie dolls. Additional work has appeared in *The Looking Glass: New Perspectives on Children’s Literature* (2016), *Oxford Bibliographies in Childhood Studies* (2017), and *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* (2019), among others. She is a reviewer for *Latinxs in Kid Lit* and has served on children’s literature award committees, such as the 2022 John Newbery Award.

Jacqueline Reid-Walsh (she/her/hers) (ORCID: 0000-0003-3408-8453) is Professor at The Pennsylvania State University. Cross-appointed between the Departments of Curriculum and Instruction and Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies, she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on children’s books and on girl cultures. She is a specialist in children’s and girls’ literature, culture, and media past and present, having published on a range of topics such as children’s popular culture, Barbie,
Seventeen Magazine, and the Sims computer games. Her present focus is on old and new media and her latest book is *Interactive Books: Playful Media before Pop-ups* (Routledge 2018). She has an ongoing digital archive and blog project topic about movable books housed with Penn State University Libraries that can be viewed at http://sites.psu.edu/play/.

References

