

Black Girl Politics: Curricular Interventions for Nurturing Black Girls' Political Consciousness

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Despite the informed, culturally attuned, active, and robust nature in which Black girls enter into dialectical exchange with one another, their peers, and other adults in schools and communities, Black girls' critical and political literacies are often minimalized and undervalued. In this paper, I discuss my engagement with two Black girls who participated in Black Girl Politics, a literacy collaborative and curricular intervention designed to explore Black girls' theorizing about social and political ideas and social change. I outline the girls' engagement with a multimodal policy project in which they reimagine how to better resource schools in ways that expand access to time and space for implementing activities that promote Black girl joy and wellbeing. This paper highlights how educational opportunities and curricular interventions for nurturing Black girls' political consciousness can prepare them to be informed, active members of society, and empower them to challenge social practices compromising their sense of freedom and belonging.

Keywords: Black girls, Critical Literacy, Political Literacy, literacies, out-of-school time education, community-based education

“Once I realized how beautiful my skin color was, I didn't need to internalize society's hatred about it. Although we do carry an unfair weight of responsibility as Black people, it is not our fault people discriminate. As it is not our defect, we should be able to walk with our shoulders held high. We are beautiful. And that should be enough. If someone can't see that, well, it's their loss.” –Rosemary (Age 15)

“Black girls can't make themselves welcomed into white spaces. It is the dominant group that has the control to change this issue. I don't necessarily believe that this specific issue is about policy, but I do think if students were more educated about the contributions the Black community has made to modern day society there wouldn't be the assumption of our knowledge being insufficient.” –Mackenzie (Age 16)

I had the privilege of working with Rosemary and Mackenzie¹ when I facilitated *Black Girl Politics*, a critical literacy course inspired by historical Black women’s literacy collaboratives (Muhammad, 2015a). Rosemary and Mackenzie are members of the GrassROOTS Community Foundation (GCF), a public health and social action organization providing leadership development programming and civic action training to Black girls and their families. The literacy collaborative took place during GCF’s annual summer camp where I had the opportunity to collaborate with 14–16-year-old girls, some of whom had been involved with the organization since its inception in 2010. The girls and I convened our literacy collaborative the summer prior to Rosemary and Mackenzie beginning their junior year in high school. Mackenzie had just turned 16, and Rosemary, 15, would follow shortly thereafter. While I had the privilege to work with a number of adolescent girls through GCF’s programs, this discussion centers on texts produced by Rosemary and Mackenzie during this particular summer literacy collaborative.

I am centering Rosemary and Mackenzie’s participation in our literacy collaborative to illuminate how they developed a habitus of joy despite the negotiations they make as Black girls navigating hostile and unwelcoming spaces. In this discussion, I highlight how even within the constraints placed on Black girls by formal educational institutions, Rosemary and Mackenzie advocated for transformative school programs and policies that attend to young people’s learning desires and supports their wellbeing.

Rosemary and Mackenzie produced a series of texts depicting the challenges they face as Black girls navigating a world whose social and cultural norms are deeply rooted in white supremacist, heteropatriarchal values, which position Black girls on the margins of society. The development of Rosemary and Mackenzie’s texts serve as an example of critical textual production (Morrell, 2003), a process in which one creates artifacts speaking to the sociopolitical realities and lived experiences of the producer. The texts, written and multimodal artifacts, reflected the reading, writing, and critical social analysis skills we can expect from Black girls’ whose political literacies embody the depth, complexity, and power of their intellect. Black girls’ outward dispositions are a manifestation of courageous spirits, audacious temperaments, and enduring resistance wholly reflective of how Black people have overcome a history of restricting Black literacies and textualities (Brown, 2007; Kirkland, 2017; Willis & Harris, 2000). Despite this, the racist and sexist legacy embedded in controlling Black communities’ access to literacy often precludes Black girls from being characterized as critical and analytical thinkers, writers, and speakers capable of interpreting and narrating the world.

Limiting narratives pertaining to Black girls’ discursive and analytical capabilities, and life and educational outcomes, may reflect the broader society’s unwillingness to recognize the breadth of their creative and intellectual literacy practices. Black girls, in particular, are victimized for how they show up in the world, and their expression and enactment of their social, cultural, and political power often results in isolation, ostracization, and punishment (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016, 2019b). In fact, Black girls are not always extended time to take part in educational

¹ All names in this manuscript are pseudonyms chosen by the participants.

processes created with the intention of fostering healthy racial identity development or nurturing cultural competencies and critical literacies.

Recognizing Black girls' sociopolitical power as central to Black girlhood, I constructed *Black Girl Politics*, a critical literacy curriculum with their social and political futures in mind. *Black Girl Politics*, as a matter of curriculum, has multiple objectives. The curriculum opens another space for girls, like Rosemary and Mackenzie, to examine the political histories and practices of Black youth and Black women. The curriculum explores the lives and societal contributions of Black women and girls; engages with politics, literature, and pop culture; and strengthens research and analytical skills. Altogether, the goal of the course is to move from generating dialogue to proposing research-informed, community-focused solutions for addressing sociopolitical issues in local communities.

This discussion draws on data from a study focused on Black girls' critical reflections of social and political issues they identified as salient in their lives. The study took place at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in the after- and ongoing effects of both global health and racial pandemics. This study is also amid the inauguration and doubling down of politicians and political power that seeks to embolden and reinscribe white supremacy into the fabric of our lives. Working against this backdrop, I initially believed the girls would be hyper-focused on these macro level issues in our discussions. Instead, I found the girls deeply focused on improving schooling even though the pandemic had brought them outside of these physical institutions in the months leading up to the study.

In this paper I discuss elements of Rosemary's and Mackenzie's writing and multimodal policy project, which delineates how schools can be better equipped to prioritize students' wellness. I also illuminate the political and agentive nature of the negotiations that went into crafting the recommendations Rosemary and Mackenzie proposed for remedying this issue. I further reflect on possibilities for educators, researchers, and practitioners to co-coordinate learning opportunities that privilege youth voice and encourage youth action. This paper highlights how curricular interventions, such as *Black Girl Politics*, can improve youth critical and political literacy skills through reading, research, writing, and multimodal production, and empower them to challenge ideas, systems, and practices that compromise sense of self, joy, freedom, and belonging.

Black Girls' Critical and Political Literacies

Race, gender, class, and power influence the politics of literacy, and this is particularly true for Black girls. Despite the informed, culturally attuned, active, and robust nature in which Black girls enter into dialectical exchange with each other, their peers, and other adults in schools and communities, Black girls' critical and political literacies are minimized and undervalued (Brown, 2007; Kelly, 2020; Morris, 2016). Hyper(in)visibility (Curtis, 2021) encapsulates how bodies and literacies are highly scrutinized while concurrently rendered invisible by educational practices that undercut the cultural knowledges, values, and expressions Black girls bring to the classroom. Furthermore, scrutinizing Black girls' communicative practices through deficit frameworks leaves out a complete and more nuanced picture of how they express their multiple forms of literacies

(Groenke et al., 2015; Kinloch, 2005; Muhammad, 2021; Richardson, 2002, 2007; Smitherman, 1977/1986; Winn et al., 2011).

Mischaracterization of Black Girls' Dispositions and Linguistic Practices

Black girls occupy spaces at many intersections including at the nexus of race, gender, class, and age. As a result of such positioning, they are more susceptible to intellectual violence, which diminishes their sense of courage and self-efficacy (Epstein et al., 2017; Esposito & Edwards, 2018; Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010; Morris, 2016, 2019a, 2019b). Black girls and Black girlhood are evaluated against invented standards of purity (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). The cultural incongruence between notions of white innocence and femininity and Black girls' material realities constrains the ability to imagine a more liberated present and future for Black girls, particularly one where Black girls are positioned as civic leaders.

This juxtaposition of Black girls against nebulous notions of femininity unfairly characterizes Black girls as unladylike, aggressive, violent, and loud to justify their isolation and exclusion from public spaces (Brown, 2007; Fordham, 1993; Epstein et al., 2017; Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Morris, 2016). Bennett's (2019) lyrical exposé best captures this sentiment as she artfully walks through the twists and turns of culturally bereft schooling spaces that inherently marginalize the natural expression of Black girls' language patterns and sensemaking:

“We [Black girls] are more complex than research makes us out to be. We are far more creative than policies birthed out of fear only to find its manifestations and practices channeled through people's personas personally, I don't get it. Collectively we ain't with it. And we too damn wise to not question the critical mandates directed towards us by culturally incompetent teachers and other authority figures” (Bennett, 2019).

Bennett's work shines a light on the many ways deficit framings about Black girls' linguistic practices ignore the richness in Black girls' literacies, language, and silences. These inadequate framings detract from the ability to shift paradigms for accurately representing the expansiveness of Black girls' cultural knowledges and social analytical capacities (Brice, 2007; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Winn et al., 2011). Still, the ongoing development of Black girlhood studies frameworks, which focus on identifying and implementing research processes, pedagogical practices, and culturally sustaining curricula for centering Black girls' ways of knowing and being remains a necessary project in disrupting dominant narratives that undermine the power and promise of Black girls' futures.

Reframing Black Girls' Literacies

According to Sealey-Ruiz (2016), literacy educators are in a unique position to interrupt violence perpetuated through curricular and pedagogical injustices that harm Black girls, such as those predicated on classifications and framings representative of white middle class norms and codes of communication. Writing, visual arts, and spoken word, among other tools, provide

mediums through which Black girls can critique the discourses, disciplinary practices, and educational barriers hindering their success (Sealey-Ruiz, 2016). Furthermore, there is a growing body of scholarship that speaks to culturally-sustaining methodological processes for inquiring into Black girls' critical, civic, and political literacies, and civic engagement (Curtis, 2020; Garcia et al., 2020; Logan & Mackey, 2020; McArthur, 2016; Price-Dennis, 2016), which illuminate the development of Black girls' critical literacy skills and other cultural competencies. Although, these studies are often contextualized in out-of-school or community-based sites of learning, these studies are instructive for school-based settings as well.

Black Girlhood frameworks afford researchers and practitioners a lens through which we can examine how Black girls 'politic' through their multiple literacies, gestures, and un(intentional) acts of resistance (Garcia et al., 2020; Haddix et al., 2015; Joseph et al., 2016; McArthur, 2016; Morris, 2019a; Muhammad, 2015b). Black Girlhood scholars demonstrate why Black girls' literacies deserve more attention, arguing the ways in which Black girls critically read the world are, in fact, viable literacy practices and should be nurtured through culturally sustaining curricular pedagogy and programming (Paris & Alim, 2014).

Conceptual Framework: Politicizing Socialization

"In their political journey of girlhood, how do Black girls define who they are and desire to be in the world?" (Brown, 2007, p. 124).

Black girls are social and political actors whose lives and theorizations are essential to our understanding of democracy (Brown, 2007). In *Politicizing Socialization: This is the Remix*, Brown (2007) uses an intersectional Black girlhood and Black feminist lens to introduce a cross-disciplinary conceptual framework for spotlighting Black girls' voices and experiences in the theoretical discourse on political socialization. By constructing an analysis of Black girls' literacies by drawing on Black girlhood studies, anthropology, literary studies, and cultural studies (to include Hip Hop feminism/pedagogy), Brown's (2007) framework positions Black girls as social and political actors and calls for theorizations and methodological practices appropriate for interrogating the intersectional identities, politics, literacies, and civic practices of Black girls, all of which bear on democratic practice and youth civic and political aptitude.

Previous studies (Butler-Barnes et al., 2018; Grills et al., 2016) signify the importance of looking at relationships between gender, racial identity, and critical consciousness for advancing positive youth development, academic achievement, civic efficacy. While there is a growing interest in the civic knowledge and practices of youth writ large (Ginwright, 2010; Cohen, 2006; Cohen & Kahne, 2011, 2013; Kahne & Bowyer, 2019), there is limited research available on how Black girls theorize about what they find valuable in terms of their intellectual engagement on sociopolitical issues they determine as significant for their communities. Brown's (2007) framework for politicizing socialization responds to the gaps in paradigms needed to reframe perceptions of Black girls' critical, civic, and political literacies. The research detailed in this paper offers just one example of the utility of such frameworks. As such, the findings from the study

described below open a small window into curricular practices targeting the development of Black girls' political consciousness and civic self-efficacy.

Black Girl Politics as a Site of Research

This discussion draws on data generated through the implementation of *Black Girl Politics*, a critical literacy curriculum and literacy collaborative I designed to explore how Black girls theorize about social and political issues they believe to be most salient in their lives. Literacy collaboratives are “socially constructed spaces to improve and advance literacy development among a group of learners with varying identities, experiences, and literacy experiences” (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016, p. 312-3). As a Black woman scholar-practitioner who also engages in youth work outside of this research, and who convenes with Black women and Black feminist scholars in literary and literacy development spaces, I observed how these sites make room for radical, discursive constructions seeking to disrupt hegemonic ideologies that suppress the literacies, creativity, and agency of Black women and girls (hooks, 1990). *Black Girl Politics* as a curricular intervention fulfilled the research and pedagogical aspects of my study, which included: 1) critically reading texts in a literacy collaborative; 2) developing critical social analysis skills by reading, analyzing, and writing about course texts; and 3) and gathering evidence to support the critical textual production of multimodal policy texts to conceptualize solutions to social and political issues impacting participants and their communities.

Critical Methodological Approaches

I approached the study using a critical qualitative interpretive research design. Critical research calls for socially transformative processes that positively impact people's lives (Denzin, 2017). A basic interpretive design provides a framework for exploring how people construct meaning through their interaction with the world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The study methods were informed by critical textual production (Morrell, 2003) where writers take up processes of engagement, develop academic rhetorical skills, and immerse in the act of contemplating, critiquing, and reimagining notions of power. Critical literacy educators should prepare students to not only consume texts that identify and untangle complex notions of power, but to produce texts that “serve as the manifestation of an alternate reality or a not-yet-realized present” (Morrell, 2003, p. 6). In *Black Girl Politics*, the girls dialogued and critiqued sociopolitical ideas broached in the public sphere, and those initially articulated by themselves, to write, re-write, and create political texts that serve as rhetorical, artistic, and political representations of their “counter-realities” (Morrell, 2003, p. 24).

Collecting and Reading the Data

The primary sources of data generated during our literacy collaborative included dialogical exchange, journal entries, and the language and media generated in the production of multimodal

policy texts. During *Black Girl Politics* sessions, the girls utilized their reading, reflective writing, and interpretive skills in response to course materials, which included print and digital texts, such as short stories, documentaries, speeches, and reports. Course materials provided exposure to stories written by and about Black women and girls, as well as introduced them to writers, speakers, and historical figures who speak on race, gender, culture, and politics in the United States. These texts opened up spaces for dialogue on a range of topics including racialized gender discrimination; historical and contemporary political issues related to institutional, electoral, and community politics that both inhibit and inspire Black women’s political trajectories; and the everyday experiences and cultural practices of Black women and girls. More specifically, we conversed about the manifestation of these ideas in the girls’ everyday lives.

To facilitate the development of the multimodal policy projects, the girls worked through the *Black Girl Politics Policy Action Guide*, a set of worksheets with prompts that moved from storytelling to a social action planning process to inspire future civic engagement initiatives (Figure 1).

Figure 1
Black Girl Politics Policy Action Guide Objectives



Black Girl Politics

Policy Action Guide Objectives

- **Write or Share** a personal story.
- **Conduct** online research and hold conversations with family members to gather information and evidence to provide social, cultural, or political context for your stories.
- **Identify** connections between your story and the stories or challenges experienced by members of your community.
- **Generate** ideas to address the challenges or concerns held by you or your community members using your own suggestions and information you gathered from your online research and family conversations.
- **Create** program or policy solutions centering Black girls’ experiences and addressing any challenges articulated in your stories.

Note. This image reflects the process the girls undertook to begin developing their policy projects.

Overall, the primary goal of these activities was to encourage the girls to situate their writing in broader contexts and to use their stories as vehicles for social transformation.

Analyzing the Data

Data analysis was an ongoing, iterative process. I used thematic network analysis (Attride-Stirling, 2001) to read, code, and analyze transcripts from our literature circles, the girls’ journal

entries, and their multimodal policy projects, one of which I detail below. To capture the linguistic and emotional nuances embedded in the data, I incorporated value and affective codes into the coding process, and I wrote memos while analyzing data in non-print modalities (Freeman & Mathison, 2009; Heath et al., 2010; Saldaña, 2015).

As a form of member checking (Esposito & Evans-Winters, 2022), I frequently dialogued with the girls and asked follow-up questions about any written and spoken reflections they shared in our sessions. I also touched base with the girls individually about ideas espoused in group sessions, journal entries, and multimodal artifacts. These conversations allowed me to share my findings with the girls and to hear their feedback, which further informed the analysis. This process also enabled me to verify I understood the girls' perspectives correctly and that my interpretations aligned with the meanings they attributed to their stories and the production of their artifacts.

Findings: Black Girl Politics

In the broader study, I found the girls identified the following as significant issues affecting Black girls' lives: 1) the under/representation, invalidation, and erasure of Black perspectives and experiences from highly politicized spaces, such as in schools and electoral politics; 2) the hyper-policing and surveillance of Black bodies; and 3) the mental health and wellbeing of Black youth in schools. These issues presented throughout our dialogue and informed the recommendations crafted in the girls' multimodal policy texts. While there were several findings from the study, this discussion spotlights Rosemary's (15) and Mackenzie's (16) proposal for spirit-lifting activities, including arts, sports, and other physical activities, as a measure for countering the mental and emotional effects of being under/represented and hyper(in)visible in society.

The Under/representation and Hyper(in)visibility of Black Girls

Representation, invisibility, and erasure were recurring elements in the data. In our literacy collaborative, the girls shared stories about learning to navigate the contradictions of being both ignored and hyper-fixated on at school, sometimes at home, or elsewhere. This precludes my use of the term 'hyper(in)visibility' (with parentheses) to mark how this manifests simultaneously in Black girls' daily lives. Furthermore, I use the construction under/representation (with the slash) to signify the girls' reflections on how Black women and girls are frequently misrepresented and underrepresented in society.

Some participants discerned that the under/representation of Black people in society impacts the visibility, validation, and credibility of Black women and girls at school. They reflected on the few numbers of Black women in politics, government, and the media. One of the girls argued the erasure of Black people's experiences led to further invalidation of Black perspectives, specifically in relation to curriculum development and representation in teaching, which also impedes Black students' ability to find connection in schools. To illustrate these observations in more detail, in the next section, I outline how I used the *Black Girl Politics Policy*

Action Guide as a vehicle for moving through a storytelling-to-action process in our literacy collaborative.

To structure this discussion, I am using three core worksheets from the curriculum, “What’s My Story?”, “What’s My Recommendation?”, and “Where Do You Stand?”, to detail aspects of Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s spoken, written, and digital artifacts. These artifacts speak to their concerns about the mental and emotional health consequences of being Black and girl at school. Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s project focused on expanding students’ access to time and space to take part in spirit-lifting activities that advance student wellness. Below, I also discuss the political and agentic nature of Rosemary and Mackenzie’s negotiations as they outlined the core essence of their related program and policy recommendations.

What’s My Story?

The reflections below are from Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s responses to the prompts in the “What’s My Story?” worksheet from the *Black Girl Politics Policy Action Guide*. The prompts asked the girls to tell a personal story with broader significance for their communities and to identify an issue to be remedied through program or policy level changes. In the journal entries below (Figures 2 and 3), Rosemary wrote about a time in which she felt highly visible in her classroom, and Mackenzie wrote about being repeatedly ignored by her teachers, which diminished her voice and made her feel small.

Figure 2

Rosemary Response to the What’s My Story? Writing & Reflection Prompt

My story is about microaggressions in the classroom. When I was in 8th grade, in the middle of a lecture my honors social studies teacher began screaming at me for being distracted on my computer. My computer screen wasn’t hidden, and my Chromebook was open to the google home screen. During this reprimanding, my white teacher said that I made him want to put rope attached to mirrors on each student’s neck like cattle. While he didn’t think much of this statement, the comparison to cattle hurt me. As the only Black girl in my classroom, I felt persecuted, and isolated, and dehumanized. I know that I am not alone in this experience, because many Black girls like me have been isolated and targeted inside of the classroom. This separation and singling out is a community issue, because Black girls like me are harmed by these experiences and are expected to take it.

-Rosemary

Figure 3

Mackenzie's Responses to the What's My Story? Writing & Reflection Prompt

My story definitely connects to other people's stories about being one of the only Black girls/Black people in the classrooms of my predominantly white community and can be a relatable story for all types of minorities. Of equal importance, my story deals with the concept of never feeling like I was enough but forced to assimilate. Kids around the country have shared their experiences through different [social media] platforms. They share stories of anguish that is derived from living in a community that is supposed to keep them safe, educate them, and be supportive of them, but is actually a part of a system that ultimately defies their humanity. I did not recognize these instances of injustice. This is the problem; being the only Black student in my class degraded my voice and made me feel small. For instance, the idea of my teachers not praising me for my work while praising other students that did not look like me played a heavy toll on me. Teachers prohibiting me from my success by not wishing for me to be in more advanced classes made me believe that I was not good enough. – Mackenzie

Both journal entries reflect variations in how Black girls can be singled out in classrooms. Mackenzie's story speaks to the way she was made to feel small, and to the instances in which Black girls may even practice self-silencing as a form of self-preservation (Evans-Winters & Esposito, 2010). Similarly, Rosemary's story is one of public ostracization in which her body is further made to be on view (Joseph et al., 2016). This heightened visibility subjects her to additional scrutiny and isolates her in ways that are counterproductive to the learning process. In both cases, the girls expressed mental and emotional anguish as a result of these encounters – while these may appear to be isolated incidents, compounded over time, they exacerbate lack of security and emotional safety young people should feel in schools (Morris, 2019b).

By the time I conducted this study, I had already been in community with Rosemary and Mackenzie for over two years, and I had many conversations with them about race, gender, and schooling. In the past, Rosemary told stories about not feeling beautiful due to her deep complexion and short, tight curly hair. I felt loneliness in Mackenzie's stories when she described being the only Black girl in most of her classes, which made her feel cautious about her friend groups at school. Like most of the girls in our literacy collaborative, Rosemary and Mackenzie mused about their racial and gender identities and how their self-perceptions informed decisions they made about navigating school and other public spaces like grocery stores or outdoor parks.

The girls used their stories as a foundation to begin negotiating ways to alleviate some of the hurt they felt as a result of feeling singled-out, isolated, and invalidated at school. In our literacy collaborative, Rosemary and Mackenzie decided to work jointly on a policy project aimed at improving the overall health and wellbeing of young people through adequately resourced co- and extra-curricular activities at school. The girls expressed a desire to research if their local schools had the organizational and economic capacity to offer programming to support students' mental

health and wellness. Rosemary and Mackenzie stressed access to arts and sports as critical for young people’s development, and that this would be the primary recommendation and focus of their multimodal policy project.

What’s My Recommendation?

As illustrated in Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s journal entries (Figures 2 and 3), the girls in our collaborative recalled personal encounters with racial hostility, being keenly aware of their [Black] bodies, and trying not to be too visible, too much, or trying to “blend in.” Rosemary and Mackenzie used their personal anecdotes as inspiration for contemplating program and policy recommendations for their project, which they titled “Funding for Performing Arts and Sports Programs to Help Students’ Mental Health” (Figure 4). The girls’ primary recommendation is highlighted in figure 4.

Figure 4

Excerpt from Rosemary and Mackenzie’s Policy Recommendation

In order for children to succeed, they must be well rounded, and including sports and arts programs allow students to do so. Black girls need to be ensured that they do not have to change themselves for society's approval, and that they are not to blame for their overcriminalization and adultification.

Policy Recommendations:

We believe that arts and sports programs should be a mandatory part of school systems. This would mean school systems would not be allowed to cut funding from arts and sports programs, giving students the opportunity to participate.¹² This requirement does not mean school districts would be required to have every single sport, but with adequate funding and fundraising for the sports/arts requested by students, we believe the mental health of the students will improve drastically. Arts and sports can help alleviate the impacts of stress on black girls.

To complete the project, Rosemary and Mackenzie conducted research and wrote a background report on race, gender, and income disparities in sports; discrimination and criminalization of Black girls in schools; unhealthy coping mechanisms in youth; and existing national and local programs and policies related to changing behavior and “reducing stress” in young people. They also included a critique of information on existing youth interventions they uncovered in their online research (Figure 5):

Figure 5

Rosemary and Mackenzie's Critique of Existing Youth Behavior and Discipline Programs

While these policies do address the overcriminalization of Black girls, on the other hand, these imply that Black girls are at fault because of their behavior. That is not always the case because Black girls are commonly misunderstood. Furthermore, the policies focus on changing the behavior of Black girls to conform to society ideology of respectful student but do not focus on counteracting the impact that the overcriminalization and adultification of Black girls, or how black girls have limited resources to coping mechanisms (i.e., sports and arts programs).

Rosemary and Mackenzie used their critiques as evidence to support a recommendation and action plan to distribute the research if they implemented the plan in their hometown. Rosemary and Mackenzie had strong written communication and argumentative skills. Yet, I also wanted to learn more about how they felt, where they stood on the issues they researched, and how they arrived at their recommendations, especially regarding how they see themselves as Black girls experiencing the challenges detailed in the project. Thus, I asked the girls participating in the study to complete the 'Where Do You Stand?' worksheet to get a better sense of the ongoing development of their arguments and recommendations.

Where Do You Stand?

As Rosemary and Mackenzie continued working on their project, I checked in to ask if, in their primary recommendations, they were arguing that arts and sports programs are a solution to the problems they identified regarding the isolation, adultification, and criminalization of Black girls. Rosemary explained her belief in these programs as invaluable for alleviating stress. I gently encouraged Rosemary and Mackenzie to think about what other external factors influence Black girls' schooling experiences to help them determine the sufficiency of their recommendations for addressing larger, structural issues shaping Black girls' social realities. In response to my inquiry, Mackenzie added the following statement to the policy brief (Figure 6):

Figure 6

Mackenzie's Response to My Inquiry Regarding Sufficiency of Recommendations

To be clear we are not arguing that sports can fix all the issues. BUT we are proposing that these programs can help. In order for Black girls to succeed, they must be well rounded, and requiring sports and arts programs in schools will allow students to do so. Moreover, sports and arts provide an opportunity for students to express themselves, develop relationships, memory and focus, and make people physically and mentally healthier.

Mackenzie also verbalized to me that she understood the connection I wanted her and Rosemary to see between the pervasiveness of systemic oppression on Black girls' lives and the structural and economic barriers that inhibit access to resources described in their project.

Mackenzie pushed back and expressed the necessity of being able to explore avenues that can simply “provide relief for Black girls” (Mackenzie) and to center this need as one of the more essential points they wished to illustrate in their project. Rosemary explained she understood what I was conveying about structural racism and economic disparities but felt it incredibly important to focus on programs that can give Black girls a “break” (Rosemary) from daily stressors, arguing that Black girls’ voices are often met with contempt and that, sometimes, “adults can be dismissive” (Mackenzie). Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s responses to my inquiry represented their desire to center recommendations aimed at increasing girls’ self-assertion and vocal confidence.

When I returned to the data to reaffirm Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s stated intentions, a common thread in dialogue and in journal entries was a strong desire to seek out joy-filled activities. Specifically, the girls sought opportunities allowing space to make sense of their affective responses and physical effects of feeling experiencing gendered and racialized microaggressions in school. Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s policy project is a rejection of schooling that allows what Love (2016) calls the spirit-murdering of Black children or the “denial of inclusion, protection, safety, nurturance, and acceptance because of fixed, yet fluid and moldable, structures of racism” (Love, 2016, p. 2)

Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s Critical Reflections

Rosemary’s and Mackenzie’s journal articles, personal reflections shared during our literacy collaborative sessions, and their multimodal policy project conveyed a turn to arts and sports as a means for elevating more joy in their lives, thereby ensuring that their physical, emotional, and affective realities grounded their policy project. In their final reflections, Mackenzie and Rosemary shared the following (Figures 7 and 8):

Figure 7

Excerpt from Mackenzie's Final Reflection

I never really understood why I have such a strong connection to physical activity and arts (i.e., listening to music, drawing, painting, designing etc.) until probably a few years ago. There has always been constant pressure on me to think twice before I say something which is why often times I choose to not speak at all. Additionally, I have always felt the need to triple-check my work and spend much longer than needed on it because, however much work I put into something, it never feels like enough...It was not until recently that I realized maybe the reasoning for me being so gape-kept and stressed out was not my fault but because of the way others perceived me. Whether it is me going for a run, finishing up some sprints, or just doodling on a piece of paper, all of my previous stress and the pressures of reality just disappear in thin air and at last, I am free. I become at peace with myself and am able to express myself without even having to speak out loud. - Mackenzie

Figure 8

Excerpt from Rosemary's Final Reflection

*Inclusivity in television, in addition to countless years of training from The Foundation, gave me confidence and knowledge that I was in fact enough. This information was essential once I stepped out of my comfort zone and auditioned for my first show. I was lucky to get accepted into the show, but due to selectivity I did not get the part that I wanted. I was able to brush off this setback, with the feeling of wholeness and passion. Theatre also has helped me find my voice. Through performing arts, I regained a piece of myself that was buried by my people pleasing and external pressures of perfection. Because I was preoccupied with saying what I thought others wanted me to say, I lost myself in the process. Through musical theatre, acting, singing and dance, I was able to rediscover my opinions and how to express them.
-Rosemary*

These journal entries reflect a shift I observed in how Rosemary and Mackenzie conveyed their interpersonal and navigational challenges. Over the course of the two years I engaged with the girls prior to collecting data for this study, they began to articulate a stronger sense of identity and assuredness more clearly in their storytelling. In the data analysis process, stronger connections emerged for me between the girls' experiences, reported feelings and affective meanings they attached to their encounters, and how they imagined school communities could be transformative.

Rosemary's and Mackenzie's program and policy recommendations suggest there remained some promise in creating opportunity for Black girls to feel "free" (Mackenzie) and at "peace" (Rosemary), so long as they could immerse themselves in co-and extra-curricular activities curated to increase their sense of joy.

Researcher Reflections on Black Girl Politics

When Rosemary and Mackenzie initiated their policy project, I did not see foresee what their primary objective was for proposing recommendations centered on providing adequately funded arts and sports programs in schools. I looked for unobserved connections across the data, and further analysis revealed the girls responding to desires for wellness and attending to the affective elements of enduring gendered and racialized oppression. For Rosemary and Mackenzie, joy-seeking countered the discrimination they experienced as a result of their hyper(in)visibility. Analyzing Rosemary's and Mackenzie's texts within and beyond their ability to critique systemic and structural oppression, provided a more nuanced analysis of they expressed and enacted their critical and political literacies.

Rosemary's and Mackenzie's multimodal policy project consisted of a policy narrative, a written set of recommendations, a script, and an animated video they co-produced together online with text, images, and characters who conversed about solutions education systems could implement to promote students' mental and emotional wellbeing. When I inquired about their use of this particular medium, Rosemary noted she and Mackenzie always "have fun" making videos together and co-writing the script encouraged them to make more time to reconnect with one another. Mackenzie relayed, "I like to write, and Rosemary is good at design." As the girls made choices about incorporating multimodality into their work, the process of critical textual production (Morrell, 2003) allowed Rosemary and Mackenzie to play off of each other's skillsets and gave them space to spend joyful time together. Thus, even as they advocated for access to wellness-centered and spirit-lifting activities in schools, they modeled these desires in our literacy collaborative as well. This observation is an example that serves as a reminder for researchers and practitioners, that supporting youth as they work through critical analytical processes, as they build and rely on each other for direction, is critical for trust-building and for supporting youth engagement and collaborative relationships (Vanderbilt & Ali, 2020).

Rosemary's and Mackenzie's multimodal policy project is one example that speaks to Brown's (2007) call for researchers to redefine what is *viewed as political*. Schools and community-based education sites are ripe for curricular interventions that invite Black girls to enact their critical and political literacies, in their various forms. These educational opportunities provide contextually relevant space to decode issues related to race, gender, class, and power; to learn to navigate or resist harmful policies and practices that compromise agency and wellbeing; and to question or challenge the learning objectives themselves. Insights gleaned from such educational exchanges have implications for research on youth agency, critical literacies, political consciousness, and youth resistance practices. As such, expanding definitions and parameters of civic and political literacy education enables researchers to account for the unique sociopolitical

perspectives and concerns of Black girls, Black youth, and communities of color more broadly (Woodson & Love, 2019).

Black Girl Politics for Educators and Practitioners

The findings from the study underscore how critical and political literacy programming like *Black Girl Politics* can be empowering for Black girls, including youth like Rosemary and Mackenzie – high-achieving, civically active Black girls who hold critical perspectives on how educators and policymakers can better serve young people, particularly those who are racially minoritized. Observing and interacting with Rosemary and Mackenzie as they moved through a process of storytelling-to-action is one example of how youth can write their lives and engage in sociopolitical critique (Muhammad & Womack, 2015). This is an essential aspect of youth development where educators and practitioners can invest in the nurturing young people’s critical and political consciousness (Farinde-Wu et al., 2021; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Scholars offer pedagogical guidance on utilizing critical literacy education to nurture students’ critical social analysis skills and encourage Black girls to interrogate dominant discourses about race, gender, and society, which are often misaligned with Black girls’ self-identifications and forms of expression (Morris, 2019a; Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Price-Dennis, 2016). Community-based organizations, like GCF, create opportunities for targeted experiential learning, access to social capital, same race and gender mentors, and critical civic praxis, all of which generate positive implications for academic, prosocial, and sociopolitical development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Pitcock, 2018; Sanders et al., 2018; Spencer & Liang, 2009). As evidenced in this discussion, culturally and contextually relevant curricular interventions that accentuate youth engagement in social analytical practices, where they can identify avenues for effecting change, is an important aspect of making connections between school and society and essential for advancing youth political consciousness.

Conclusion

This discussion sought to highlight my engagement with two Black girls who participated in *Black Girl Politics*, a literacy collaborative and curricular intervention for exploring Black girls’ theorizing about social and political ideas. In reflecting on the curricular and pedagogical choices I made in the literacy collaborative, I highlight the girls’ engagement in the development of a multimodal policy project in which they articulate the need increase access to school-based activities that foster student wellness and belonging.

Creating learning communities that cultivate Black girls’ political consciousness and critical literacy skills increases their depth of understanding, articulation, and analysis of sociopolitical issues. Doing so prepares youth to be informed, active members of society and empowers them to challenge ideas that compromise their sense of joy and freedom. Fostering such dispositions and affirming Black girls’ intellectual and affective needs are an important part of creating space for generative dialogue and consciousness raising. Finally, situating civic and

political literacy education within the social and cultural ethos of Black girls' communities, in which they may see themselves more readily as social and political actors, can inspire efforts for civic and political change.

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