

# For Us, By Us: The Role of Black Feminist Pedagogy in the Education of Black Girls

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*This article describes how one group of African American women educators set out to change the narrative surrounding the achievement of African American girls at their high school through the creation of an elective course entitled Ourstory, which was designed using the tenets of culturally relevant, African-centered, and Black feminist pedagogy. The main goal of the Ourstory course was to use the study of African American women's history and heritage to increase self-esteem, self-efficacy and provide a safe space for the African American girls involved. This descriptive study explores the design and implementation of the Ourstory class using a qualitative analysis of the course syllabus, lesson plans, course materials, student work, observations, and interviews with staff and students. The findings from this study demonstrate that there is value in creating a space for African American girls to express themselves and build community.*

**Keywords:** African-centered pedagogy, Black feminist pedagogy, critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy

As the students enter the classroom, they are greeted by their teacher, Ayesha Akbar, standing near the doorway wearing a Gele, a colorful headscarf that is traditionally worn by women in Nigeria. Akbar's dress matches her crown, which gives her the air of a Yoruba priestess paying homage to Oshun, the river goddess. "Good afternoon, Sister Ayesha" echoes through the room with the entrance of each girl. Once the second bell rings, the teacher and students form a circle in the space that is freed up as the tables are pushed into the shape of an open cup along the edges of the classroom. The words "meet & greet" are projected on the whiteboard at the front of the classroom, which lets everyone know the agenda for this circle. It is followed by the prompts: "name, grade and what is your favorite thing about you?" Akbar presents the students with a colorful fan made in Ghana, and she tells the students that whoever is holding the fan is the only one talking. As the fan floats around the circle, the girls take turns introducing themselves and replying to the prompt. Their voices blend and form a list similar to the poem "Ego Tripping (There May Be a Reason Why)" by Nikki Giovanni (1973). Each girl's announcement fills the room with pride. My favorite thing about me is: "my hair, my skin, my everything," "my lips, my eyebrows, my nappy eyelashes," "my body," "my facial features". "I love that I can dance," "I love everything

about myself, my personality, my laugh,” “my birthday sign”, “my favorite color”, “where I come from,” “my favorite thing about myself is how open minded I am,” “I love that I am quiet and observant,” “I’m crazy,” “I’m a true friend,” “I like my ethnicity,” “my personality,” “my history.” These are the voices of the girls that comprised the first cohort of the Ourstory class at City High School, a class designed for Black girls by Black women. (The name of the class and school, as well as all proper names, are pseudonyms.)

The Ourstory class was an elective course in African American women’s history offered at City High School (CHS) during the spring semester of 2018. The Ourstory course was piloted as a part of the African American Student Success Initiative, which was created in 2013 by the Shorehills School District (SSD) to “interrupt the inequitable pattern of outcomes for African American students.” According to Lisa Johnson, a counselor at CHS and the creator of the Ourstory course, the primary goal of the class was to “provide a stable environment for our girls, to build self-efficacy number one, and increase their self-esteem to provide them context and history on African women and African American women who have done remarkable things throughout history and what our history is.” During our first conversation, Johnson expressed the belief that a course about African American women’s history and culture would help the African American girls at her school overcome the challenges they faced as young Black women. Johnson’s vision for the Ourstory course reached beyond the four walls of its classroom. She believed that the framework she created had the potential to be implemented across her district or even nationwide. This belief led her to collaborate with me as a researcher to “tell the story” of the class. Thus, my goal in undertaking this research was to describe the pedagogies and curricular practices that the teachers of the Ourstory class employed as well as the experiences of the African American girls they served. With this work, I show just how vital pro-Black classrooms are in a world laden with anti-Black racism, especially for Black girls, because they create a safe space for Black girls to thrive by cultivating holistic wellness, critical consciousness, and community.

### **Literature Review**

While some studies show that African American girls tend to express more confidence in their ability to reach their personal goals and have higher self-esteem than other groups of girls, other studies reveal that there are barriers that impede the success of African American girls and women in K-12 schools, college and beyond (Buckley & Carter, 2005; Smith-Evans et al, 2014). In the report “Unlocking Opportunity for African American Girls: A Call to Action for Educational Equity”, the NAACP Legal Defense & Educational Fund in association with the National Women’s Law Center highlights the fact that African American girls are least likely to graduate from high school within four years than any other group of girls (Smith-Evans et al, 2014). In addition to on-time high school graduation rates, African American girls lag behind all other groups of girls in terms of academic performance when measured by standardized tests and grades. On the 2013 NAEP, 39% of African American girls scored below-basic in reading and 63% performed below-basic in math. The lack of proficiency in reading and math is also reflected in the SAT, ACT and AP exams, on which African American girls underperform all other groups of

girls as well. Since these exams serve as gatekeepers for college admission, it is no surprise that college acceptance and completion rates for African American young women are also lower than those of any other group of young women. Johnson noticed that these trends were true for the African American girls in her school district. In fact, graduation rates for African American girls at CHS had declined for three years preceding the implementation of the Ourstory class. This course was an attempt to use curriculum and instruction to address the gap between what we know to be the strengths of African American girls as a group and some of their academic outcomes by teaching them to identify, discuss and address systemic oppression that impedes them while teaching them to holistic health, community, and civic action.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I have anchored this study conceptually in Black feminist pedagogy, culturally relevant pedagogy, African-centered pedagogy, and critical race theory. Black feminist pedagogy provided the main theoretical lens to discuss the findings in this study because it is the most specific way to articulate the experiences of the African American women educators and the African American teenage girls involved in the Ourstory course. I also used culturally relevant pedagogy and African-centered pedagogy to articulate the educational ideologies and instructional practices that served as the foundation of the Ourstory course because these theories were most aligned with the language used by the instructor to describe her own work. Further, the major tenets of critical race theory helped to articulate some of the key assumptions present in this study as it pertained to race, racialized identities and racism, and the role they play in schooling and learning. Lastly, I situated the Ourstory course as a part of the Alternative Black Curriculum to connect it to the rich history of classrooms designed by Black educators for Black students because this framework reaches beyond the literature on culturally relevant, African-centered, and Black feminist education.

### **Black Feminist Pedagogy**

*“As black women we see black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face”*  
– *The Combahee River Collective, 1977*

As a Black woman researching the teaching practices of other Black women and the learning experiences of Black teenage girls, I could not imagine a more fitting theoretical lens than Black feminism. Black feminist thought represents a diverse set of observations and interpretations about the experiences of Black women and girls as described by Black women intellectuals (Collins, 1986). When it comes to Black feminism in schools:

Black feminist pedagogy is not merely concerned with the principle of instruction of Black women by Black Women and about Black women; it also sets forth learning strategies informed by Black women's historical experience with race/gender/class bias and the consequences of marginality and isolation. (Omolade, 1987, p. 32)

Black Feminist Pedagogy centers on the educational experiences of Black women and girls as crafted by Black women and girls. This does not mean that instructional materials guided by Black Feminist Pedagogy focus solely on Black women as a topic (Henry, 2005). What it does mean is that it strives to expose and supplement the standard curriculum that often centers the stories of white, wealthy men, so it leads with the thoughts, actions and contributions of Black women and girls.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Essentially, culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) boils down to teaching what works, teaching what matters, and teaching what makes a difference. Gloria Ladson-Billings defined culturally relevant teaching as:

A pedagogy of opposition not unlike critical pedagogy but specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment. Culturally relevant pedagogy rests on three criteria or propositions: (a) Students must experience academic success; (b) students must develop and/or maintain cultural competence; and (c) students must develop a critical consciousness through which they challenge the status quo of the current social order. (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p.160)

Two important beliefs distinguish culturally relevant teachers from many other teachers: one is the way that they think about themselves, their work, their students and their community, and the other is the way they think about knowledge. Culturally relevant teachers see themselves as artists and their teaching as a work of art (Ladson-Billings, 2009). They also see themselves as part of the community in which they teach, and their teaching as an act of service to help enrich the community. They also believe that all students can make a difference in the community, and they make it a point to cultivate activism.

### **African-centered Pedagogy**

Although African-centered educators are not a monolithic group, there are a few widely accepted unifying themes. African-centered pedagogy is counter-cultural because African-centered teachers see society as anti-Black and themselves as pro-Black. The content in an African-centered classroom is focused on the study of African civilizations and the history and culture of people throughout the African diaspora (Lee et al., 1990; Merry & New 2008). There is also a thematic focus on the resistance of African and African American people against colonialism, slavery, segregation, and all other forms of white supremacy. Both foci are intended to encourage students' consciousness-development. African-centered pedagogy is also skills based with a focus on critical thinking and political education. The priorities of African-centered teachers reach beyond academic skills to the development of students' psychological and spiritual selves.

## **Alternative Black Curriculum**

African American educators have been engaged in culturally relevant pedagogy long before Ladson-Billings introduced the term. Some scholars have described the earlier work of African American educators as the Alternative Black Curriculum, and it has existed for at least a century (King, 2014). The Alternative Black Curriculum focuses on five tenets: 1) constructing counter narratives about the importance of Africa and its civilizations 2) nurturing the development of an African diasporic identity 3) highlighting the contributions of African Americans in “nation building” in the US 4) collaborating with allies outside of the Black community who are also fighting to end white supremacy 5) raising awareness about the impact that racism has on the lives of the African American community (King, 2014). The core beliefs and practices of this educational movement are important to this study because the educators involved with the Ourstory class are a part of this rich tradition of African American educators using their classrooms to combat inequality, inequity, and injustice.

## **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) articulates some of the major assumptions of this study. As a foundation, CRT states that racism is present in all aspects of everyday life, and schools are no exception. CRT asserts that not only is racism present, but that it is “so enmeshed in the fabric of our social order, it appears normal and natural to people in this culture” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). Critical race theory provides the foundational understanding that the reason that African American girls as a group underperform academically when compared to other racial groups is largely due to “institutional and structural racism” (Ladson-Billings & Tate 1995). Thus, the Ourstory class serves as an example of CRT at work because its very existence is an acknowledgement of racism’s presence and impact at City High School as well of the ways in which some educators have chosen to address anti-Black racism.

All these theories rest upon the importance of nurturing a critical consciousness in students while African-centered, Black feminist and culturally relevant pedagogies all highlight the importance of agency, community, and activism. Although both African-centered and Black feminist pedagogies center the study of African and African American history and culture, only Black feminist pedagogy places an emphasis on highlighting the contributions of Black women (Henry, 1998). Additionally, culturally relevant pedagogy asserts that successful teachers of African American students give them the opportunity to thrive academically while honoring their culture, raising their consciousness, creating community, and promoting activism. With this study, I used these theories to produce culturally responsive research that centers the experiences of the Black women and girls involved in the Ourstory course.

## Methods

This study began alongside the Ourstory class and was initiated by its creator, Lisa Johnson. Just as she was designing the objectives for the course and interviewing potential teachers, she was looking for researchers to collaborate with to document the process. In my first interview with Johnson, she explained that she wanted me to “tell the story” of the course. With this conversation in mind, I decided to engage in a descriptive study of the Ourstory class that centered on the pedagogical frameworks at play in the creation of the course as well as how those pedagogical choices shaped student experiences in the course.

## Research Questions

1) How did culturally relevant and African-centered pedagogies help to shape the curriculum of the Ourstory class? 2) How did the Ourstory’s class use of culturally relevant and African-centered pedagogies inform the educational experiences of its participants? 3) How do critical race theory and black feminist pedagogy help to illuminate the teaching and learning that took place in the Ourstory class?

## Context and Participants

This study took place in a large urban district in the western United States at City High School during the 2017-2018 academic year. The school’s diverse population of 1000 students was 50.3% Hispanic or Latino, 15.4% African American, 14.5% Asian, 10.6% White, 3.4% Filipino, 1% Multiracial, 0.9% Pacific Islander and 0.8% American Indian or Native Alaskan. About two-thirds of the students at the school were socioeconomically disadvantaged, slightly more than one-third were English language learners and one-fifth were students with disabilities.

The Ourstory class was an elective course offered at CHS, which was only open to self-identified African American girls, and it was taught by African American women. The content covered in the class focused heavily on the history and culture of African and African American women. The class met three times a week (50 minutes on Mondays/Tuesdays and 90 minutes on Thursdays) from January-May of 2018.

All the participants in this study were African American women and girls. As the research collaborator, I brought the lens of an experienced African American history teacher and social studies methods instructor. The course creator, Lisa Johnson, was a veteran school counselor assigned to CHS by the district’s African American Student Success Initiative as a post-secondary specialist. The course instructor, Ayesha Akbar, was an educational consultant that specialized in holistic, African-centered learning. There were 17 African American teenage girls who chose to participate in this course.

## Data Collection and Analysis

My data collection and analysis occurred in four phases: exploratory, classroom observation, student interviews, and content analysis. The first stage involved an interview with Lisa Johnson to understand her goals for the class and our research collaboration as well as an analysis of course documents like the syllabus, scope and sequence and potential assignments. The second phase of data collection involved eight hours of classroom observation and the collection of instructional materials and student work. The final stage of data collection consisted of student interviews, which were audio-recorded and transcribed. I interviewed all the girls who were available and consented to being interviewed. My goal for these interviews was to elicit students' thinking about the Ourstory class in terms of its implementation of the various components of African-centered, Black feminist, and culturally relevant pedagogies.

I conducted a focused qualitative analysis using aspects of my theoretical framework to shape *a priori* codes or themes (LeCompte & Schensul, 1999). My themes were *her*, *self*, *build*, *excel* and *act*. I used the first theme, *her*, to organize any time the class studied the contributions that women in the African Diaspora have made throughout history. I used the theme *self* to organize moments when Akbar or Johnson nurtured the students' identity development and critical consciousness. *Build* helped me to highlight instances when Akbar fostered a sense of community amongst the girls in the Ourstory class. *Excel* was used to note any time Akbar pushed students toward academic excellence, and *act* was used to capture moments when the girls in the Ourstory class were encouraged to become leaders and agents of change in their communities. I made several passes through the documents, first applying my initial themes followed by ones that emerged from the data. The most significant emergent theme I added, *push*, which I used to organize data that connected to any instances of discrimination students expressed were due to their racialized and gendered identities.

## Findings

In the following three sections, I present the major findings from my study on the Ourstory class. First, I describe how the creator of the Ourstory class designed its units to center holistic wellness, joy, and civic engagement and how its teacher worked to create a classroom environment that uplifted students' identities as young African American women in a school where they expressed that their race and gender made them the targets of discrimination. Then, I describe some of the students' impressions of the class.

### The Joy They Deserve

I AM...

I AM beautiful and black

I AM worthy of all great things this world has to offer

I AM Vibrant

I AM MAGICAL

I AM UNBREAKABLE  
I AM CONFIDENT  
I AM ME

This was the mantra that Lisa Johnson wrote for the students to recite each day of the Ourstory class. It encapsulated units that she designed for the course, which centered on cultivating self-esteem, holistic health, and civic action. She designed the first month of the semester to center on uplifting the girls by highlighting the beauty within them, and she planned to use readings like Sonya Renee Taylor’s *The Body is Not the Apology* to guide discussion on this topic (2018). The second month was designed to focus on knowledge of self, African American philosophy, and heritage. This unit combined the study of historical content about African queens with discussions about contemporary materials like the documentary *Dark Girls* (2013), so that students could learn to articulate and address the intersectional oppression they face while developing a sense of pride in their royal lineage as modern-day Black queens. The third unit of the course was designed to center on mindfulness, self-care while dealing with stress and life choices. This unit included yoga and dance classes paired with excerpts from Saeeda Hafiz’s book *The Healing: One Woman’s Journey from Poverty to Inner Riches* (2018). The fourth unit was designed to center on civic engagement and leadership. This unit was future focused and featured trips to various colleges, universities, and businesses to expose the girls to different avenues for their interests and agency. It was also designed to include a guest lecture from a local Black woman who served as a college administrator.

### **The Hate They Feel**

On the first day of the Ourstory class, Akbar gave her students a survey, and the opening prompt was “What 3 questions do you have about being an African American woman?” Every one of the 13 students responded with questions shaped by feelings of anxiety about how the world perceived their budding Black womanhood. Unlike the cacophony of self-love that was expressed in the opening circle that day, the responses to this survey read more like Ntozake Shange’s poem “For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Enuf” (1975). The girls of the Ourstory class wondered: “Why don’t people like me for being Black?,” “Why do other races feel like African American people are inferior or that being Black is a bad thing?,” “Why are people so intimidated by us?,” “Why do they put so many stereotypes on us?,” “Why do they hate us?” Akbar’s question laid the foundation for her later work around developing students’ critical consciousness, which is a major pillar of both culturally relevant and African-centered pedagogies. It was an open-ended question about how the girls see themselves in the world in terms of their race and gender. The students’ answers centered on their Blackness and the anti-Blackness that surrounds them. One girl in the Ourstory class explained to me in an interview how she is being *pushed out* of school:

Mya: I kind of don't like school sometimes because the teachers are annoying, and they be doing too much sometimes. I feel like they just like pointing me out even when I don't



really do much stuff. They point me out like Mya stop talking and I don't really be doing nothing. I'm very quiet at school, and a lot of times when a teacher comes at me with an attitude, I get an attitude back with them, so they don't like me for that.

After a few follow-up questions, Mya gives an example of how she responds when she feels that she is being *pushed out* by a teacher. She explains:

I don't know why he didn't, but he just really did not like me at all, and he always used to call me out. He always used to do stuff that was just annoying to me, so I just would try to miss class.

As much as this interview revealed about certain aspects of the school culture at City High, it showed me just as much about the culture in the Ourstory class that was crafted by Ayesha Akbar. In contrast to how Mya would “just try to miss” her Spanish class because she felt attacked by her teacher, she felt “respected” by Akbar in her Ourstory class. This dichotomy made me wonder what Akbar was doing in her classroom to create this sense of community. It was important to understand this dichotomy between the Ourstory course and City High School as a whole before exploring other aspects of the class because culturally relevant teaching is not just rooted in national or racial identities, but it is also community specific. Thus, the dynamics of the school and the neighborhood played a huge role in the instructional practices and the student learning.

### **The Space They Need**

As students continued to stand in the circle from the meet and greet, Sister Ayesha led the group in the creation of classroom agreements or norms. Each student was given a chance to add or echo one agreement as one student scribes on the board: “no cell phones,” “one mic,” “I don't know why people always so quick to say one mic...nobody follows it,” “respect,” “step up-step back,” “have fun,” “confidentiality,” “discipline yourself,” “be responsible.”

As described earlier, Sister Ayesha began each Ourstory class with an opening circle that gave students the opportunity to share something that mattered to them. One opening circle prompt was to describe “one thing that gives you gratitude and one thing that gives you an attitude.” This question, like every classroom activity that Akbar crafted created space for student voice. While still in the opening circle, Akbar and the students would outline the agreements (commonly referred to as “classroom norms”) for the day. Next, they would “get it poppin” (also known as a “do now”) that was often a quote analysis, and the quotes were always the words and thoughts of prominent African American women. The “get it poppin” was followed by “gurl talk” (more widely known as “think-pair-share”), which was when students discussed their thoughts about the quote. After these warm-ups, the main activity for the day took place, which was often a video about African history or a prominent African American woman with guided notes.

In addition to student-centered classroom norms, Akbar frequently gave students the opportunity to voice their thoughts and feelings about the class. During one observation, Akbar asked students the following questions: 1) “What things would you like to do in class?” 2) “What makes class fun for you?” 3) “What rewards would you like?”. My interviews with the students gave me even more insight into this sense of community that the students felt in the Ourstory class.

Aaliyah explained that the class community was fraught with conflict in the beginning, but with some nurturing from Sister Ayesha they were able to overcome those challenges:

When the class was first together, I was a little on the edge about the class. I don't want to be here, no one is talking, a lot of the girls don't like each other. It was just terrible, but now I think it does feel like a community because we've all grown close to each other. Like in the beginning, one of our classmates said when our teacher was saying we're sisters, part of a sisterhood, a lot of us didn't believe it, but now I think we believe it because we've talked, we've hugged we've cried on each other's shoulders we've shared personal things, so I think we all got to understand each other it's how we all became a little closer.

This description of the community that Akbar created in the Ourstory class aligns with the priorities of many African-centered teachers because it reached beyond academic skills toward the development of social and emotional skills.

### **If They Can See It, They Can Be It**

The instrumental to Goapele's "Closer" played in the background as Sister Ayesha sang and poured libations while the students responded to each line with *àșe*. Akbar sang these lyrics to the students of the Ourstory class on a few occasions:

Our motherland,  
Our fatherland,  
Africa, mother of civilization  
Father of culture  
To the ancestors of Kemet now Egypt  
Nubia now Sudan  
Kush now Ethiopia  
Yorubaland  
Iboland  
Mama Africa

As a self-described "edutainer" Akbar was very comfortable weaving song and dance into her lessons. Akbar's teaching practice is deeply influenced by her own personal journey of self-discovery. In a series of lessons called "From Ratchet to Royal", Akbar described her own struggle to overcome "ghetto culture" and reconnect with her African roots. Thus, Akbar's pedagogical choices are grounded in African-centered pedagogy. This was made clear by how she centered the study of African civilizations in the Ourstory class. For instance, one day the main activity for the class was to watch a video entitled "Egypt on the Potomac" and respond to prompts like:

What is the original name of the country we know today as Egypt? Describe the kind of people that lived there. What did they contribute to human civilization as we know it? What is your relationship to those people? Would you consider them your ancestors? Why/Why not?

By asking the students whether they would consider ancient Egyptians their ancestors, Akbar is pushing the students toward the development of an African diasporic identity, which also aligns her work with the major tenets of the Alternative Black Curriculum.

When I interviewed the students, they expressed how studying African history and cultures made them feel a renewed sense of pride in their identity as young African American women. Mya remarked that “I learned about queens in Africa that I never knew about. I learned things about Africa that I didn't know about. And it's refreshing to learn more about Black Africa.” Lucky added that “I feel like this class made me a little bit mature because I know more about my ancestors, the queens. It made me a lot smarter. I know more about Africa. Instead of Africa just being Africa, there are other countries and stuff. It taught me a lot. It made me a better person.” Akbar’s lessons about ancient African civilizations and their queens were a central piece of her “Ratchet to Royal” curriculum. She often used the stories and images of African queens, like Egypt’s Tiye, in contrast with what she deemed to be stereotypical, and often oversexualized, images of Black women, like Nicki Minaj. The goal of this juxtaposition was to encourage the girls in the Ourstory class to carry themselves like their ancestors, the African queens.

In addition to studying Africa’s history, cultures, and queens, the Ourstory class spent a great deal of class time studying the life story of Maya Angelou. During one observation, Akbar gave her students the following prompts to respond to as they watched a YouTube video about Maya Angelou:

- 1) What do we know about Maya Angelou?
- 2) What are three things she’s known for being?
- 3) Give 5 facts about her early life.
- 4) What two tragedies did she face in her early life?
- 5) What history did she make in her first job, and why is this important?
- 6) Write three facts about her political involvement.
- 7) Describe her time in Africa.
- 8) What are 5 things about her that are inspirational?
- 9) Homework: Write a paragraph...How do you relate to the life of Maya Angelou?  
Why?

Johnson encouraged Akbar to use the study of Maya Angelou’s life to teach the girls in the Ourstory class that if this remarkable woman can come from a community like theirs and achieve great things, so can they. Maya Angelou was also a part of the final exam, which ended with a section that prompted students to “show what they know” about various topics from the class. Students were given the option to highlight their “favorite African Queen,” the “life and legacy” of Winnie Mandela or the “life and legacy” of Maya Angelou. Akbar’s lessons and assessments centered on the study of Black women leaders and artists certainly helped to address one of Johnson’s main reasons for creating the Ourstory course because she taught them about “African and African American women who have done remarkable things throughout history.”

## Discussion

This study is built upon the fact that Black girls are brilliant, and, as the girls of the Ourstory course made clear on the first day of their class, they know it. They enter schools overflowing with intelligence and confidence, and the Ourstory class was designed to protect these qualities in the Black girls at City High School.

I accepted Johnson's invitation to "tell the story" of the development of the Ourstory class because I admired her goals for the course. Johnson saw that despite the brilliance of the students she counseled, the graduation rates for African American girls at her school had been declining for three years, and she decided to do something about that with the creation of the Ourstory class. She created it to "provide a stable environment for our girls", a space that would strengthen them against discrimination that might otherwise push them out of school. The Ourstory class shows us the value of pro-Black spaces in an anti-Black world, especially for Black girls as well as the importance of designing classroom spaces for Black girls that cultivate holistic wellness, critical consciousness, and community.

The classroom environment that Akbar created provided the space in which the girls could begin to answer the questions they posed on the first day of the Ourstory class about why people hate them. For instance, one of the lessons for the course was designed to have students define and discuss stereotypes and how they affect people using clips from the Marlon Riggs film *Ethnic Notions* (1986) to drive the conversation. By engaging her students with the concepts of racialized identities and stereotypes, Akbar helped her students understand that *they* hate you and *they* are intimidated by you because you are Black girls, and the racial and gendered stereotypes that exist in this society influence people's responses to you (Morris, 2015; Nasir, 2012). *They* expect Black girls to be loud and argumentative and *they* punish Black girls whether or not they live up to this stereotype (Morris 2007; Blake, Butler, Lewis & Darensbourg, 2010).

Akbar's work in the Ourstory classroom, especially her practice of circle time, aligns with the Black feminist notion of creating a "home space" because it served as a place for her to affirm the racial identity of her students while helping them to discover shared perspectives and experiences that connected to their identities as Black girls (Jacobs, 2016; Ward, 1996). In the Ourstory class, Akbar served as an "other-mother" by nurturing the development of her students' "oppositional gaze", equipping them with the tools necessary to critique negative stereotypes about Black women (Case, 1997; Hooks, 1992). Akbar's other-mothering created a home-space for the girls of the class in a school where anti-Black racism often made them feel pushed out.

In addition to helping the girls of the Ourstory class begin to understand, articulate, and address the anti-Blackness in their everyday lives, Akbar created a space that cultivated joy and holistic wellness using song, dance, and yoga. For instance, she would often play songs that the students chose as they entered the classroom and worked on their quote of the day. This practice made the class feel light-hearted and fun. Akbar also used some sessions of the class to help the students prepare a dance performance for the Black history month assembly. Additionally, Akbar shared her classroom with other Black women in the community, like Saeeda Hafir, who led the Ourstory students in a few yoga practices.

The culturally relevant, African-centered curriculum of the Ourstory class was designed to uplift Black girls by teaching them about African civilizations and Black resistance to white supremacy, developing their critical consciousness, and nurturing their holistic health and sense of community.

### Conclusion

My study of the Ourstory class presents an example of a classroom environment designed by Black women educators to nurture the positive identity development of Black teenage girls. With this study, I highlight the potential that culturally relevant, pro-Black classrooms have to strengthen African American girls against the anti-Black racism they encounter, especially when they have instructors who nurture the development of their critical consciousness. I argue that all schools that have Black girls on their rosters should be working to develop a course like the Ourstory class, especially schools that see a disparity in the academic performance of Black girls when compared to other groups of girls as was the case with City High School.

In terms of the research, Black girls need to be given more voice in the rooms where research collaborations form between school districts and universities. While the girls' feedback about the Ourstory course positioned them to play a role in the design of the next version of the course, this work could be taken a step further by positioning them as researchers who not only give voice to the data, but they take part in making meaning of it as well as sharing their findings with the world. This would help continue to disrupt paradigms of traditional research on Black girls and build a cannon of research praxis that is carried out in collaboration with Black girls about their experiences in school, further joining research about culturally responsive curriculum with more culturally responsive research practices.

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