

## ***To Mica With Love: Engaging Black Canadian Girls in Educational Research***

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*A growing body of research exploring the lives of Black Canadian students largely focuses on achievement and disciplinary outcomes. Such scholarship centers the negative experiences of Black boys, overlooking the quotidian lives of Black Canadian girls in public schools. The lack of educational research engaging Black Canadian girls hinders scholars, educators, and communities from fully reimagining schools for liberation. Drawing from literature and personal stories, this arts-informed autoethnography investigates how I partnered with three Black Canadian girls to reconceptualize their role in research processes. The study relied on disability critical race theory (DisCrit), Black feminist notions of homeplace, and Endarkened storywork to share and analyze narratives of Black girl leadership and innovation. The study revealed how Black researchers and Black Canadian girls used the arts, storytelling, and space to reimagine research processes as homeplace. The study emphasized the need for scholars to engage in research that uphold marginalized Black girls as producers and leaders striving for social change.*

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Research on the academic achievement and engagement of racialized children in public schools abound Canadian scholarship. In fact, a burgeoning body of literature explores the schooling experiences of Black Canadian children. Such work further exposes the violence wielded by an education system that has long sought to exclude, surveil, and police Black children in schools across the country (Aladejebi, 2021; Litchmore, 2021; Maynard, 2017; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). Canadian scholarship on Black children's lives continues to prioritize the viewpoints of their adult caretakers. Moreover, such discourse largely centers adults' ideas on the educational performance and disciplinary experiences of Black Canadian boys (Litchmore, 2021; McPherson, 2020). Scant literature positions Black Canadian girls, especially those receiving special education support, as producers in research aimed at reimagining schools as liberatory spaces. Failure to engage Black girls in educational research hinders scholars, educators, and communities from fully grasping the possibilities for liberatory learning spaces in Canada (Litchmore, 2021; McPherson, 2020).

This arts-informed autoethnography draws on literature and personal stories to investigate how I partnered with three Black Canadian girls to reconceptualize their role in research processes. Centering my work with Mica, a 10-year-old Black girl in a special education program, the study investigated how I worked with Black Canadian girls to establish research processes as homeplace. The study drew on disability critical race theory (DisCrit), Black feminist notions of homeplace, and Endarkened storywork to share and analyse narratives of Black girl leadership and innovation.

I begin this article by providing an overview of how Black Canadian girls are positioned within educational research. This paper continues with a presentation of the questions, theories, and frameworks that guided the study. Afterwards, a personal narrative grounds the exploration of Black girls as leaders in research processes, most notably in the study's design. I close the article by offering researchers a series of reflection questions to help guide their repositioning of Black Canadian girls as knowledge producers in educational research.

### **Setting the context: The depictions of Black Canadian girls in educational research**

Canada boasts a diverse and longstanding Black population. The country's relationship with Black Canadian communities is marred by practices of slavery and segregation, and racially restrictive immigration policies (Aladejebi, 2021; Lawson, 2013; Litchmore, 2021; Maynard, 2017). Walcott and Abdillahi (2019), Maynard (2017), Brand (2020) and other Black scholars point to the ways that Atlantic chattel slavery and its afterlives continue to unfold in Canadian institutions like education. In these afterlives, anti-Black racism is endemic to Canadian public schools and profoundly shapes the lives of Black children (Maynard, 2017; Walcott & Abdillahi, 2019). Literature, school board reports, and personal narratives point to disparities between Black students and their ethnoracial counterparts and attest to an “opportunity gap” (James & Turner, 2017; Litchmore, 2021). For example, statistical data collected by Toronto District School Board (Toronto District School Board, 2008; Zheng & De Jesus, 2017), the largest school board in the country, further reveals Black students, particularly Black boys, as disproportionately impacted by discipline policies and special education placement.

Much scholarship is dedicated to investigating the vulnerability of Black boys in Canadian schools, noting their outperformance by Black girls (Litchmore, 2021; McPherson, 2020). The schooling experiences of Black Canadian girls, especially those in non-gifted special education programs, receive less attention in popular and academic discourse (Evans, 2019). In North America, a growing body of research explores the injustices faced by Black girls in public schools. American evidence indicates that Black girls are also impacted by hostile school cultures and exclusionary policies (African American Policy Forum, 2015; The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality, 2019; Litchmore, 2021; Morris, 2013, 2016; The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2014). Yet, research focused on Black Canadian girls continues to be minimal and, consequently, promotes an image of Black Canadian girls as “doing fine” (San Vicente, 2010; Smith, 2019). The overwhelming focus on Black boys in Canadian school settings has resulted in, as Brown (2011) argues, “a unitary framework of

oppression, where Black girls' experiences are treated as incidental or as in opposition to the experiences of Black boys" (p. 600).

### **Possibilities for the role of Black Canadian girls in educational research**

While completing my doctoral studies and working as a classroom teacher in southeastern Ontario, I launched a school reading support program. The program sought to engage a small group of Black boys receiving special education support in a biweekly 40-minute reading group. Five boys, all of Caribbean descent, participated in the culturally responsive program and attended the Tuesday lunch drop-in sessions. Three girls, Mica and her two best friends, challenged the exclusion of girls from the program. Mica reminded me, "Some of us Black girls don't read too good." I welcomed the girls into the program and set out to support this small group of Black students to become confident readers. Each session concluded with Mica pressing the group for self-advocacy strategies Black girls could use to support their learning journey at the school.

I searched local and international resources to inform my work with the girls in the reading program. I contacted school and district departments for resources and scoured libraries for current literature. The school board offered binders of lesson plans geared towards after-school programs for girls. The resources largely centered girls fostering a positive self-image, whereas educational scholarship on Black children emphasized creating learning environments for Black boys.

In her book, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women and Queer Radicals*, Saidiya Hartman (2020) argues that research has long failed to uphold Black girls as thinkers, planners, or producers. Sociologists, historians, and other scholars, explains Hartman, "fail to discern the beauty and they see only the disorder, missing all the ways Black girls create life and make bare need into an arena of elaboration" (Hartman, 2020, p. 23). A growing number of educational researchers investigate the agency, authority, and authenticity that Black Canadian girls exercise over their lives (Adjei, 2018; Litchmore, 2021; McPherson, 2020). This arts-informed autoethnography adds to educational research centering the lives of Black Canadian girls. This study was guided by the following questions:

- How do research processes center the stories, ideas, and viewpoints of Black Canadian girls?
- How do scholars partner with Black girls to establish the research process as homeplace?

### **Underpinning frameworks**

#### **Homeplace**

The study explored how I, a Black woman researcher, engaged Black Canadian girls in research processes as producers. Ultimately, I was curious about how Black women researchers might partner with Black Canadian girls to reimagine the research process as homeplace for themselves and other Black girls. bell hooks (2015) opens the chapter, Homeplace as Resistance, with a personal story recounting childhood visits to her grandmother's house. Through a series of

confessional anecdotes, hooks explores the significance of homeplace for Black girls. Homeplace, according to hooks, is a site led by Black women where Black children’s agency is nurtured. Homeplace affirms Black children's relationships, identities, and ideas. Black motherwork scholars (see: Fearon, 2020; Onuora, 2015; O’Reilly, 2004) also uphold homeplace as integral to ensuring Black children's health and well-being in a society that “attempts to dehumanize, oppress, suppress, and annihilate Black [lives]” (Evans-Winters, 2019, p. 23). Such literature proclaims the need for Black women to partner with Black children to establish homeplace in private and public spaces.

### **Disability critical race theory (DisCrit)**

This arts-informed autoethnography traced my research journey with three Black Canadian girls. The girls were in a special education program at their school. Grounding the study in disability critical race (DisCrit) theory allowed me to explore the positioning of Black girls in schools and educational research. A number of scholars across the United States and Canada investigate the ways that race and dis/ability intersect (Adjei, 2018; Parekh et al., 2021). Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013, 2022) propose a DisCrit framework that theorizes the ways in which race, racism, dis/ability, and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education. Using DisCrit theory, I sought to understand how the structural power of ableism and racism informed my relationship with Black girls participating in educational research. A DisCrit theory is guided by the following tenets (Annamma et al., 2013):

- DisCrit focuses on ways that racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy.
- DisCrit values multidimensional identities.
- DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled as raced or dis/abled.
- DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations, traditionally not acknowledged within research.
- DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of dis/ability and race and how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some.
- DisCrit recognizes whiteness and ability as property and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of white, middle-class citizens.
- DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance.

## **Methodology**

### **Autoethnography**

I used autoethnography as a research methodology to investigate my experiences with a small group of Black girls. Autoethnography helped me to reveal and then grapple with intimate

accounts on Black women researchers partnering with Black Canadian girls in educational research. In her article, *For Loretta: A Black Woman Literacy Scholar's Journey to Prioritizing Self-Preservation and Black Feminist–Womanist Storytelling*, Baker-Bell (2017) describes the fundamental features of autoethnography. By way of Adams, Holman Jones, and Ellis (2014), Baker-Bell (2017, p. 531) contends that autoethnography:

- uses the researcher's personal experience to detail and critique beliefs, practices, and experiences;
- acknowledges and esteems the researcher's relationships with others;
- uses deep and careful self-reflection/reflexivity to identify and interrogate intersections between self and society, the particular, the general, the personal, and the political;
- shows “people in the process of figuring out what to do, how to live, and the meaning of their struggles”;
- balances intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity; and
- strives for social justice and making life better.

My engagement with autoethnography required me to occupy multiple positions simultaneously within the research process — participant, researcher, and audience. Ultimately, it enabled me to deeply reflect on, from varying perspectives, the ways that Black women researchers reimagine their partnership with Black girls in educational research.

### **Arts-informed research**

This autoethnography also intertwined “the systematic and rigorous qualities of conventional qualitative methodologies with the artistic, disciplined, and imaginative qualities of the arts” (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 59). Guided by an arts-informed narrative methodology, this study employed Endarkened storywork to investigate the role of Black Canadian girls as producers in educational research; and to render scholarship accessible to multiple audiences. Endarkened storywork, explained Toliver (2021), focuses on how Black people “consider the sacred, nurturing ideals of story and storytelling”(p. xx). It requires that Black women researchers listen to our research participants, ourselves, and our world, honoring the connections between the story, storyteller, story listener, cultural traditions, and spiritual relationships (Toliver, 2021). Toliver reminds Black women researchers that Endarkened storywork allows us to uplift the storied lives of people whose narrative traditions have been ignored in qualitative research. Accordingly, this arts-informed autoethnography centered the experiences of the main character, Ms. Bedford, and her student, a Black girl named Mica. The creative non-fiction story captures the teacher's journey to position her student as a producer throughout the research process. The methodology required the use of art to represent the study's findings. Specifically, the findings section of this article relied on the Black storytelling tradition of call-and-response to illustrate the complexity and richness of the affirming relationship between the teacher-researcher and Black Canadian girls.

Diasporic African communities have long engaged in the practice of call-and-response. Call-and-response patterns characterized play and work songs and spirituals sung by enslaved Africans in the Caribbean and North America (Sale, 1992). Call-and-response is a dialogic exercise

between a speaker and listener where “the speaker’s statements (‘calls’) are punctuated by expressions (‘responses’) from the listener” (Smitherman, 1977, p. 104; Toliver, 2021). Indeed, call-and-response is a shared storytelling event requiring communal participation (Richards-Greaves, 2016; Toliver, 2021). Toliver (2021) noted the prevalence of call-and-response patterns in everyday exchanges throughout the African diaspora. As long as there is a speaker and an audience, Toliver (2021) asserts, call-and-response can occur in a multitude of interactions. For example, call-and-response might be revealed in a conversation between a Black girl and her teacher, during an academic presentation, in a public school reading program, or in a short story. As call-and-response can be carried out in a myriad of Black communal spaces, I contend that the practice can also be found in stories documenting Black girls as producers in educational research.

The creative non-fiction short story, *To Mica With Love*, represents the study's findings. This data-driven short story focuses on my journey to reconceptualize the role of Black Canadian girls in educational research. Much like Baker-Bell (2017), I relied on personal memory, journal writings, classroom interactions, current scholarship, and conversations with staff and students. These sources furnished pertinent information necessary to tell my stories. The representation of the findings as a short story engages readers in a dialogic exercise with participants and current scholarship. Readers are asked to vicariously experience what the participants have gone through and affirm them as legitimate sources of knowledge. Readers are also challenged to leverage that knowledge to enact a change.

This study used a comprehensive analytic process, rooted in Black storytelling, for collecting and interpreting stories shared during interviews (Banks-Wallace, 2002; Banks-Wallace & Parks, 2001). This process positions Black storytelling as central to the analysis, synthesis, and presentation of data. For this study, I used and built upon Banks-Wallace’s (2002) process to reveal the depth of my experiences with the girls in the study. This analytic process includes the following:

1. Locating the interviews within the historical context and cultural norms.
2. Demarcation of boundaries for individual stories.
3. Thematic and functional analysis of stories.
4. Grouping stories according to themes and functions.
5. Comparison of story themes and functions across participant interviews.
6. Restructuring participants' memories into storied accounts.
7. Reviewing stories for conspicuous absences and silences.

### **Structure of Footnotes**

Similar to other arts-informed researchers, like Onuora (2015), I used footnotes extensively throughout each story. Onuora (2015) used footnotes to contextualize data-driven stories about African Canadian maternal pedagogies. With the use of footnotes, *To Mica With Love* assumes a call-and-response structure to pose reflective questions amongst the story's characters, and between the reader and characters. The story structure also elicits the reader to critically reflect on

their own practices and experiences. The questions require the reader to disclose their own responses to the ideas put forward by the Black girls in the study. This format honors an arts-informed research methodology by centering research around Black girls' stories. I invite readers to engage in the call-in-response in ways that are authentic to them. Readers are welcomed to read the footnotes separately from the story or alongside.

## Study Context

This study took place at Pineridge Public School, located in southeastern Ontario. Over half of the elementary school's student population speaks a primary language other than English. The kindergarten to grade 6 school serves many families with ties to the Caribbean and Africa. The Black girls highlighted in this study attended the *homeschool program* (HSP), a non-gifted special education program. The girls spent part of their day learning in a regular classroom and part separately with the HSP teacher. The girls received literacy and numeracy support from the HSP teacher.

The school district used socio-economic indicators (e.g., family income, percentage of families receiving social assistance, level of adult education, family structure, etc.) to deem the school community as facing high degrees of challenge. The school district recognized that such challenges can impact children's opportunity to achieve high educational outcomes. Accordingly, Pineridge Public School received additional financial and human resources from the district.

Pineridge Public School participated in a district-wide initiative to engage teachers in educational research. I, along with other teachers, received professional development and planning time to explore inquiries tied to Black student achievement. Participating teachers, with the support of community, district and university researchers, designed collaborative inquiries to deepen their understanding and improve the schooling experiences of Black elementary students. With the support of this initiative, I set out to investigate Black girls' roles in educational research.

## Collaborators: Ms. Bedford and Mica

The creative non-fiction short story introduces readers to the fictional characters, Ms. Bedford and Mica. The character of Ms. Bedford is based on my experiences as a teacher-researcher in southeastern Ontario. At the time of the study, I was a classroom teacher completing my doctoral studies. Born in Canada to Jamaican immigrants, I speak Jamaican Créole, English, and French. Following two years of teaching French at Pineridge, I launched the school's reading support program for Black students.

The story's character Mica represents a 10-year-old Black girl who attended Pineridge Public School. Mica lived with her mother and two sisters in a cooperative apartment building next to Pineridge Public School. Mica's mother migrated to Canada from Jamaica 17 years prior to the study. Although born in Canada, Mica proudly identified as Jamaican and spoke Jamaican Créole as a primary language. The poem *When You See Me* captures Mica's voice and nuanced identities:

*When You See Me*

When you see me, you might think:

I'm just another Black girl.

I'm poor.

I'm as loud as the 35A bus horn.

I'm fat like a fried dumpling.

But if you took the time, you'd realize:

I'm honest with my feelings.

I'm the best dancer in my family.

I'm loved by many.

I'm sweet like a Julie mango.

**Findings: To Mica With Love**

November 22

On a Tuesday morning in November, mere minutes before lunch, ten-year-old Mica races down Pineridge Public School's sole hallway. Her black runners slap the tiled floors. She storms through the school passing the water fountain and the library's welcome sign. Mica halts at room 104. She grabs the silver knob and swings open the classroom's wooden door. She weaves around four students huddled on a mat over a picture book and marches to the teacher's desk. Ms. Bedford, the school's reading support teacher, rests her pen on the oak desk and sweeps a trio of locs from her face to reveal a pair of glasses. The spectacle's gold frames blend into her skin and match her blouse.

The teacher asks, "How are you?"

"I just wanna be heard," Mica whimpers. Tears stream down her cheeks and stain the collar of her white shirt.

Ms. Bedford's hand wipes the young girl's face. Her wedding band sparkles against the child's dark skin. She prods, "Who's not listening to you?"

"Nobody listens to me!" Mica sobs, "I got kicked out of class cuz I told Ms. Berg I needed more time to finish that test."

"Let's schedule time to practice reading and answering written questions," Ms. Bedford suggests. The woman's hands come together atop the desk. Rows of fluorescent light point out imperfections, dents, and scratches on her ring.

"Figuring out this reading thing isn't enough," Mica insists, "I also need to get people to listen to me." The woman reaches into the desk's top drawer and pulls a box of tissue. Mica snatches two sheets and blots the space between her nose and upper lip.

"I know teachers talk about us in the staff room and in meetings," Mica confides, "If teachers really want to make things better, they gotta listen to us kids too." Ms. Bedford watches the young girl ball the tissue into her fist. Mica leans over the desk towards the teacher. The young girl

wonders aloud, “How are we supposed to make it in this school, if nobody listens to us?”<sup>1</sup> The lunch bell rings and the four students rush from the carpet to the door and race down the hall. Mica drops the soiled tissue to the ground and scurries to a seat across the room. The afternoon light spills through the nearby window. Mica gazes outside and watches a group of children, bundled in coats and hats, dance around a pile of leaves.

January 8

Mica: I’m not sure about this project.

Bedford: Your mom doesn’t want you to work on it?

M: Naw, my mom loves the idea.

B: So, you don’t want to do it?

M: I don’t read too good. Maybe someone else can take my place?

B: We’re working on the reading thing together. You’re perfect for the project. You have lots of ideas. That’s what’s most important— ideas<sup>2</sup>.

January 28

M: Yeah, of course, everyone in the program wants to become better readers. But, us Black girls, we also wanna know how to get these teachers to listen to us.

B: What do you mean?

M: Like, you keep telling us that we gotta tell our teachers what we need to help us learn better.

B: Each of you in the program have an IEP<sup>3</sup> that outlines ways for you and your teachers to work together. This will help you be successful at school. Like, your IEP says that teachers are supposed to give you extra time to complete classwork.

M: I think this project should be about how us, girls in the program, stand up for ourselves at school. Because these teachers ain’t giving me more time on my work.

B: You think the others would be interested in this?

M: Yes, Miss. Trust me. They will. You know what happens to me when I ask my teachers for extra time or a computer?

B: What?

M: I get kicked out of class. And not just me. The other girls too.

B: (Ms. Bedford nods her head.)

M: When we stand up for ourselves, they say we’re being rude.

B: That’s what we’ll investigate for this project, then. Everybody in the program will look at how they stand up for themselves at school.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> What experiences led you to your area of research?

<sup>2</sup> What skills, competencies, and lived experiences do you value when partnering with Black girls in educational research? How do your research processes embody these values?

<sup>3</sup> "An IEP is a written plan describing the special education program and/or services required by a particular student, based on a thorough assessment of the student's strengths and needs that affect the student's ability to learn and demonstrate learning" (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> How do your research processes reflect the importance of listening to Black girls?

M:...and try out new ways to get teachers to listen to us.

February 19

B: We gotta talk to the students in the program about the project and think of a start date. We also gotta get permission from a few people— parents, kids in the program, and the research department.

M: You know we can't work on this project at the school, right?

B: Why not?

M: Why would we? Other teachers would be popping in the room and be all in our business.<sup>5</sup>

B: I get it. Maybe at the public library right on George Street?

M: That library would work or even at Mo's Pizza Place. There's only eight of us in the program. We mus' can find a spot not too far from the school.

B: Leave this with me. I'll work on the permission forms.

M: We need a spot away from the school so we can be ourselves and tell the truth and figure things out.

February 27

B: Do you like how we organized the project? Students will get a chance to look at their IEPs and track how they stand up for their rights at school. They'll even brainstorm and try out new ways to let teachers know what they need to succeed at school. Everyone will have time to talk about their ideas and write in their journals.

M: It feels almost good.

B: Almost? It's everything we talked about.

M: I'm not feeling how we share our ideas.<sup>6</sup> I don't like all that talking and writing.

B: That's how we've always done it in the program.<sup>7</sup> We talk things out, draw pictures, and write in our journals.

M: Imma talk to some of the girls about how to switch this up cuz this ain't it.

March 6

B: You sure about this?

M: Miss, you gotta trust me.

B: I put all the material that the students brought over there in that big bag. We have boxes, toilet paper rolls, empty containers, and stuff like that. I also got paint, paint brushes, scissors, glue, markers, construction paper, and even fabric.

M: This is gonna be amazing!

B: You all have everything needed to build a mini model of the school and community.

M: And finger puppets! We're gonna make puppets of ourselves!<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> How does your research uphold Black girls' agency and resistance?

<sup>6</sup> What mechanisms do you have to collect critical feedback from Black girls about your research processes?

<sup>7</sup> How does your research practice respond to critical feedback from Black girls?

<sup>8</sup> How do your research processes facilitate Black girls' storytelling?

B: You sure this will work? You sure this is what the girls want?

M: Yes! Imagine. Instead of talking out our ideas about what happens to us at school or in the neighborhood, we're gonna act it out with these puppets!

B: It's different.<sup>9</sup>

M: The best part is we'll build everything ourselves.

B: Imma trust you on this.

M: Now, you're listening. This project feels good.

### Story Insights

Hartman (2020) affirms the necessity for those engaged in the study of Black girls to listen intently to their stories. For her own work on Black girls, Hartman (2020) admits, "It required me to speculate, listen intently and read between the lines..." (p. 56). This study, whose findings were captured in the creative non-fiction story *To Mica With Love*, revealed how I partnered with Black girls to establish homeplace within research processes. By way of the characters of Mica and Ms. Bedford, *To Mica With Love* showcased how Black Canadian girls and I came together to reimagine the study's design so as to assert Black girls as producers and leaders.

### Storytelling: Research topic and data collection tools

Throughout history, Black Canadian women and girls resisted racist oppression and sexist domination in a myriad of ways (Aladejebi, 2021; Cooper, 2007). For example, Black women constructed and upheld homeplace as a site for radical transformation and care (hooks, 2015). In fact, homeplace continues to be a humanizing space where Black people, particularly Black women and girls, come together to restore our dignity in the face of gross injustice. In the book *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, bell hooks (2015) introduces her grandmother's house as homeplace. hooks (2015) describes this site as her grandmother's special domain "where all that truly mattered in life took place—the warmth and comfort of shelter, the feeding of our bodies, the nurturing of our souls" (p. 41). For many Black women and girls, including hooks (2015), homeplace provides us with opportunities to grow, develop, and nurture our spirits. Homeplace is a radical political site for Black people to affirm one another and by so doing heal many of the wounds inflicted by ongoing subjugation.

In *To Mica With Love*, the main characters continue the tradition of Black women and girls coming together to create homeplace. The story opens with Ms. Bedford reimagining the research process as a site that affirms Mica and other Black girls. Initially, Mica thought her reading ability, race, and gender disqualified her from contributing to the research process. Mica believed her multidimensional identities prevented her from embodying the necessary leadership competencies to meaningfully engage in educational research. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2022) maintain

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<sup>9</sup> How do your research processes identify and center Black girls' epistemologies and ontologies?

that racism and ableism circulate interdependently to uphold notions of normalcy. Such normative standards view differences among Black girls, like Mica, as deficits.

Ms. Bedford challenges Mica to help determine the study's research focus. Mica draws on her experiences as a Black girl in a special education program to ensure that Black girls are positioned as producers in the research process. Mica's leadership resulted in the study investigating Black girls' ongoing resistance and organizing for humanizing learning spaces. Such a study focus heralded students in the reading program as active agents resisting structures and practices that stigmatized their participation in the school community. Mica and Ms. Bedford determined a research focus guided by Black girls and addressed John Powell's sentiments, "I feel like I've been spoken for and I feel like I've been spoken about, but rarely do I feel like I've been spoken to" (Dalton, 1987; p. 442). To establish homeplace within the research process, Black women scholars must disrupt the tradition of ignoring the voices of traditionally marginalized groups, like Black girls. Much like Ms. Bedford, researchers must privilege insider voices and invite an understanding of ways that Black girls respond to injustices.

This study also underscored the importance of researchers centering Black girls' stories when creating homeplace. Attending to Black girls' personal narratives encourages us to learn how they creatively explore their own realities, celebrate, and reimagine futures. Mica proclaims the significance of the arts in the lives of Black girls. She advocates for Black girls' use of puppets and miniature school models to help tell their personal stories. These self-made storytelling instruments expand Ms. Bedford's understanding of data collection tools.

The arts have long offered Black women and girls opportunities to reaffirm their humanity amid injustices. Art is a freeing space where Black girls tell their stories, nurture their voice, and wield their agency. Within academia, a growing number of scholars uphold Black traditions of using the arts for self-expression and social transformation. Black women researchers, like Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997), Gloria Ladson-Billings (2014), and Bettina L. Love (2019) explore Black students' use of the arts to express emotion, communicate difficult concepts, spur action, and enact change. Such scholars are particularly committed to the healing and affirming potential of the arts in the lives of Black children. Love (2019) writes,

Art is more than a mode of expression, it is how [Black] children make sense of this unjust world and a way to sustain who they are, as they recall and (re)member in the midst of chaos what it means to thrive (p. 111).

Mica and Ms. Bedford leverage performance and visual arts as valid data collection tools to further reveal how Black girls understand, experience, and confront oppression in their day-to-day lives at school. The use of such creative data collection tools helps establish a sort of homeplace where Black girls freely and safely share their stories for healing and social change.

### **Resistance space: Research site**

Toni Morrison (O'Reilly, 2004), bell hooks (2015), Patricia Hill Collins (1986, 1987, 2000) and others have long investigated acts of resistance led by Black women and girls. Black feminist scholars have extensively contributed to a body of literature that presents Black women and girls

as leaders in making homeplace. Scholarship on homeplace typically focuses on Black women's leadership in creating domestic households to care and nurture their family in the face of racist and sexist oppression. This study captured the ways that I worked with Black girls to establish research processes as homeplace. In so doing, the study captured the importance of selecting a research site that nurtures student resistance when studying the lives of Black girls.

This study depicted the ways that Black women and girls used space to reimagine the research process. *To Mica With Love* captured the significance of choosing a research site where Black girls can organize and resist. For this study, I worked with Black girls to create spaces where students were able to heal from injustices endured at their school. For example, in the story *To Mica With Love*, Mica refuses to engage in the research process at the school. Pineridge Public School is not an affirming space for Mica and others who attend a special education program. At Pineridge Public School, Mica and the other Black girls are stigmatized and segregated into alternative learning spaces. Disability critical race theorists like Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013, 2022) acknowledge how experiences with stigma and segregation often vary based on other identity markers (i.e. gender, language, class) and how this negotiation of multiple stigmatized identities adds complexity. Thus, such thinkers renounce imposed segregation and promote an ethic of belonging and full inclusion in schools. Mica encourages Ms. Bedford to select a research site where students can organize for their full inclusion in the school community. In the short story, Mica identifies the local library and pizza shop as places where Black girls can organize without interruption from others. By heeding to Mica's leadership, Ms. Bedford understood the integral role that space plays in ensuring Black girls' safety and wellbeing throughout the research process.

The short story, *To Mica With Love*, also reminded readers of the ways that homeplace renders the research process as a site of resistance for Black girls. Throughout history, Black women and girls have recognized the subversive value of homeplace (Collins, 2000; hooks, 2015). Homeplace is a space crucial for Black women and girls to uplift, organize, and struggle to resist domination. Mica and Ms. Bedford aim to establish a liberatory space where Black girls in special education programs resist public narratives based in deprivation, and instead restore their dignity. Disability critical race theorists advocate for diverse forms of resistance. In fact, many call for activism that connects academic work to the community. Annamma, Connor, and Ferri (2013) explain,

[Activism that links academic and community work] avoids sterile ideas being handed down from the ivory tower without practical application as well as 'studying the natives' wherein people who know nothing about the community suggest ways to fix it based on deficit perspectives (p. 18).

Throughout the study, Mica and the other Black girls lamented the challenges they faced in navigating the public school system. The girls advocated for research processes that facilitate the centering of their experiences of exclusion and stories of agency. For example, the short story captures Mica's sorrow at being denied access to a laptop to help her complete classwork. Mica also recounts her frustration at being dismissed from the classroom when requesting additional time on tests. Both Mica and Ms. Bedford realized the importance of Black girls advocating for

their rights in a society that dehumanizes Black women and girls (Fearon, 2020; Onuora, 2016). Accordingly, their resistance involved using research processes to establish a homeplace that existed beyond the confines of the school. Mica identified the library and pizza shop as safe public places where Black girls could come together, engage in research, and resist the violence inflicted on them by oppression. By collectively creating a research site outside of the school, Mica along with the other Black girls became resistance leaders that used research as one avenue to organize for improved schooling realities.

### Conclusion

In Canada, a proliferation of scholarship examines injustices occurring within the public education system. While much extant research on Black students investigates Black boys' experiences in schools, scant research examines the schooling lives of Black Canadian girls. This arts-informed ethnography addressed such a gap in literature by capturing my research experiences of establishing homeplace with a group of Black Canadian girls.

This study affirmed the need for educational researchers, particularly Black women scholars, to engage Black Canadian girls in research in ways that view them as leaders. By grounding research processes in critical understandings about dis/ability and homeplace, we can honor the knowledge and leadership of Black girls in special education programs. Such research processes foster the centering of Black Canadian girls and their stories. A reimagining of educational research in Canada for Black girls must acknowledge their creation of homeplace as collective practices of freedom. I close this article by offering researchers a series of reflection questions to help guide their repositioning of research processes for Black Canadian girls:

- How might research processes facilitate the centering of Black Canadian girls' multidimensional identities?
- How might research processes privilege the knowledge and leadership of Black Canadian girls?
- How might educational researchers partner with Black girls to trouble notions of normalcy?
- How might research processes link to the histories and current realities of Black Canadian girls?
- How might educational researchers position Black Canadian girls as agents of change?

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