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Running, running the show: Supporting the leadership development of Black girls in middle school

Lauren C. Mims & Cierra Kaler-Jones

Abstract: Black girls have been at the forefront of educational change as leaders who "run the show" throughout history yet their unique contributions are missing from books and classroom materials, and their perspectives excluded from definitions of leadership. To address these deficits, we interviewed 21 Black girls enrolled in a summer program in a mid-sized Southern city individually and in focus groups about their knowledge of Black women leaders and definitions of leadership. Using narrative analysis, we analyzed the individual and focus group interviews. Knowledge of Black female leaders ranged from 0 to 4 with the majority (11; 52%) listing 1. Definitions of leadership aligned with identity developmental questions of "Who am I?" and "How do I fit in?" Being a leader involved making positive life choices for staying on the right path, even if that path differed from their peers, and emphasized that leaders support other Black girls. Suggestions as well as a list of ten guiding questions to help researchers, policymakers and practitioners continue to support developing Black girl leaders in middle school are provided.

Keywords: *Black girls*, *early adolescence*, *leadership*

This We Believe **characteristics:**

- Students and teachers are engaged in active, purposeful learning.
- Curriculum is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.
- Leaders are committed to and knowledgeable about this age group, educational research, and best practices.

Coach Joy[1] stood at the head of the circle of girls wearing a big necklace and a bright tutu. She introduced herself and then began passing out pom poms, crowns, and mini tutus. She asked students if "everybody was doin' alright," providing space for students to share their emotions. Some students nodded while other students looked at the ground. Coach Joy smiled encouragingly, then began teaching students an engaging call and response song. In following her lead, girls began to clap and stomp to her beat and, within seconds, every girl began singing:

Oh oh oh OH (coach)
Oh oh oh OH (girls)
We're the Black girls (coach)
We're the Black girls (girls)
Black girls (coach)
BLACK GIRLS, (girls)
Running, running the show (all)

The energy in the room was electric as the group of Black girls sang the chorus about running the show over and over again. Each time Coach Joy led the chorus, students responded more confidently. When Coach Joy finished the song, she asked students if "everybody was doin' alright" again. This time, the circle yelled a resounding "yes!" Through this powerful song, Coach Joy, in her own way, provided students with an affirming reminder that they can lead by "running the show". What if Black girls, in every classroom, were provided with the supports to explore their emotions and learn more about what it means to "run the show?"

Black girls have been at the forefront of educational change as leaders who "run the show" throughout history.

[1] All names have been changed to pseudonyms.

Black girls and young women led the school desegregation movement (Anderson, 2018; Devlin, 2018). As captured in the famous photo by Norman Rockwell of Ruby Bridges entering William Frantz Elementary School, an all-white school at the age of six, Black girls and their families felt like school desegregation was "their call to arms" (Devlin, 2018). In studying the generation of Black girls who desegregated schools, Devlin documents how Black girls as young as six "exhibited a sense of obligation to lead, no matter the consequences, danger or pain inflicted" (Devlin, 2018, p. xvii).

The legacy of leading continues today with Black girls activists such as Mari Copeny who is fighting for clean water for children in Flint, Michigan, Naomi Wadler who is fighting for the recognition of Black girls, Zyahna Bryant who wrote the petition to the Charlottesville City Council calling for the removal of the Lee Statue and renaming of the park formerly known as Lee Park, and Marsai Martin who decided to create characters for girls that looked like her when she could not find any, and, finally, countless Black girls who "run the show" by taking a stand in schools and communities across the United States.

While Black girls have been "running the show" throughout history, their unique contributions have been left out of books and classroom materials. For instance, the Cooperative Children's Book Center, a research library at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education, found that only 340 of 3,700 books the library received featured significant African or African American content/characters, with just 22 of the books by Black authors and illustrators (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018a). In the classroom, a recent study found that only 8–9% of class time is devoted to Black history (King, 2017). Bishop's (1990) work discussed what she called the 'mirror and window' metaphor, where books are a mirror to readers' experiences and offer windows to real and imagined worlds and have the potential to amplify characters who are strong Black girls. In reflecting on the implications of exclusion, Adrienne Rich, an American poet, wrote "When those who have the power to name and to socially construct reality choose not to see you or hear you … when someone with the authority of a teacher, say, describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked in the mirror and saw nothing" (Rich, 1994). She continues, describing the requirements needed to cope with this void, writing, "it takes some strength of soul–and not just individual strength, but collective understanding–to resist this void, this non-being, into which you are thrust, and to stand up, demanding to be seen and heard."

This article sees and hears the unique identities and perspectives of Black girls by exploring contemporary definitions of leadership from the perspective of Black girls. Specifically, we asked Black girls what Black women leaders they see in society and what leadership means to them. In alignment with This We Believe by the Association for Middle Level Education (formerly National Middle School Association) (NMSA, 2010), we call for educators to empower youth in the middle grades, specifically by, "providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take responsibility for their lives, to address life's challenges, to function successfully at all levels of society, and to be creators of knowledge" (p. 13). Accordingly, this paper concludes with a discussion of how we can nurture the leadership potential of every student, especially Black girls, in middle school through culturally affirming practices.

Literature review

Middle school is an important time for supporting students' identity development. During early adolescence, students begin to ask important questions about their identities, such as "Who am I?" and "How do I fit in?" (Erikson, 1968). During this time, family and peer relationships, school experiences, cultural and societal expectations, and media messages become critically important to the process of identity exploration (Williams, Mims, & Johnson, 2019). For youth, the answers to these complicated identity questions are resolved through youth's interpretation of responses to social cues such as "the faces and voices of my teachers, neighbors, store clerks," "what parents and peers say I am," and/or the representation (or lack thereof) of their identities in cultural images (Tatum, 2000, p. 18). The answers to these questions shape the choices individuals make during adolescence and throughout adulthood.

Spencer, Dupree, and Hartmann (1997) emphasized that for youth of color, social cues about race, skin color, class, gender and maturational differences are important as youth develop their racial-ethnic and gender identities. They explain that adolescents experience a self-appraisal process (e.g., How do others see me?) in response to stereotypes and biases about their social identities (e.g., race, gender, class, skin tone, maturation). In response to appraisals of their identities, youth must determine how to react and cope (Spencer, 1995). Perceived social supports can help African American students cope with stereotypes and biases and lead to self-acceptance and resiliency (Spencer, 1995).

As the place where students spend a great deal of time, schools are important social contexts for receiving feedback and developing students' racial-ethnic and gender identities. In a review of 111 studies on the role of adolescent's personal, social, and learning related identity development, Verhoeven, Poorthuis, and Volman (2019) found evidence that schools and teachers intentionally and unintentionally influence student's identity development throughout the school day. For example, processes such as middle school tracking (e.g., in pre-vocational or pre-academic pathways) and promotion or demotion, influenced student's social identity development by artificially creating status groups of students.

The researchers also found evidence that teacher expectations limited or supported adolescents' school engagement and identity development. Notably, researchers found disparities in teacher expectations, with teachers exhibiting lower expectations for African American students. Teachers' low expectations of Black youth negatively influenced students' referral to advanced coursework and/or extra curriculum activities that support learning and leadership development (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Verhoeven et al., 2019). In studying the identity development of African American youth in adolescence, specifically, DeCuir-Gunby (2009) found that teachers' racialized expectations also influenced Black students' racial identity development.

However, actions by teachers, such as recognizing and complimenting students, providing space for students to lead and explore, allowing students to make mistakes, and building students' critical consciousness, supported students' personal and social related identity development (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Verhoeven et al., 2019). Additionally, teachers can purposefully cultivate students' leadership skills by supporting positive decision making, self-awareness, and collaboration (Wingenbach & Kahler, 1997).

Particularly at the middle grade level, when students are starting to answer complex identity development questions, it is important for students to see leaders who look like them as well as recognize and develop their own leadership skills. Middle grade teachers have a unique opportunity to either aid or hinder students' personal definitions of leadership and their ability to identify themselves within the framework of being a leader through the feedback they provide. It is critical that educators have high expectations for Black girls as well as recognize, support and cultivate the leadership potential of Black girls.

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To accomplish this, it is important for teachers to embrace that there may be many definitions of leadership, with some definitions and leadership characteristics that may be unique to Black girls. In the next section, we describe how leadership has typically been defined and the implications for Black girls.

Definitions of leadership

Historical definitions of leadership often referred to leadership as the ability to influence others to follow a course of action. Historian Thomas Carlyle developed one of the first definitions of leadership, which he called Great Man Theory. Great Man Theory suggests that leaders are born, not made, and that it is great men who have leadership qualities inherently within them that make them leaders. Further, seminal leadership studies scholar Ralph Stogdill (1948) described leadership as having heroic traits such as confidence, exhibiting knowledge and skill that contribute directly to leading people effectively, and being able to efficiently solve and manage problems. For example, in a study that explored which leadership traits individuals desire in their leaders, some of the most consistent traits include people skills, a need for achievement, and emotional stability (Nichols & Cottrell, 2014). However, much of the literature that contributes to this definition focused on leadership as demonstrated by white men (Stogdill, 1948).

The leadership of women, especially women of color, and youth, especially Black girls, has been underexplored. Recent work has begun to address this. For example, a task force commissioned by the American Psychological Association sought to explore how women leaders and feminist leaders led differently than men (Chin, Lott, Rice, & Sanchez-Hucles, 2007). The task force (Chin et al., 2007) found that for women leaders and feminist leaders, the core objective of leading was empowering others.

Definitions of leadership among youth. Historical definitions of leadership have also excluded the youth perspective. Moreover, in studies that explore youth leadership, researchers use definitions driven by adults'

definitions of leadership. Additionally, much of the existing literature about youth leadership examines leadership program outcomes, rather than youth's self-definitions (Conner & Strobel, 2007; Dempster & Lizzio, 2007; Kress, 2006; MacNeil, 2006; Matthews, 2004). Recent research has found that including youth perspectives in discussions about leadership further redefines the definition. For example, Mortensen et al. (2014) study of 130 youth who participated in a year-long leadership development program found that youth envisioned leadership as a collective effort, not just a position. Youth also viewed leadership as an opportunity to enact change. In another study that centered students' definitions of leadership, Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (2006) developed a Leadership Identity Model, where youth moved through a process of creating a leadership identity. In the final phase of the model, named "leadership differentiated," the students defined leadership as a process, rather than an outcome, and leadership was based on community and collaboration to meet a shared goal.

Definitions of leadership among girls. Women may define leadership differently because of gender inequities and its consequences. In a 2014 Girl Scouts study of girls aged 11–17, girls expressed concerns that they would face additional difficulties in leadership positions because of their gender (Girl Scouts, 2014). Seventy-four percent of girls shared that if they went into a "career in politics, they'd have to work harder than a man to be taken seriously." Additionally, girls thought that the media portrayed female politicians, as opposed to male politicians as "more motivated by their emotions and less capable" as leaders (Girl Scouts, 2014).

However, Black girls aspire to be leaders at high rates despite these perceived gender inequalities. For example, 53% of African American girls in a 2013 Girl Scout survey expressed a desire to be leaders, and 75% were likely to consider themselves to be leaders. When asked about whether they participated in defined leadership activities, 73% of African American girls said that they work together with their peers to accomplish a mutual goal and 70% said they challenge themselves by trying new things (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011).

Even though Black girls regard themselves as leaders, historical records and narratives of Black girl activists and leaders show that there have been erasures and distortions of the participation and leadership of Black girls in current events and movements in history (Jiménez, 2016). For example, Claudette Colvin refused to give up her seat to a White woman at the age of fifteen on a Montgomery bus nine months before Rosa Parks. However, Claudette Colvin's story is not discussed in the same way as other Civil Rights leaders because of her darker skin and pregnancy. When reflecting on why she did not give up her seat, Colvin credited her teacher's lessons on Black women leaders as inspiration, saying,

> Whenever people ask me: 'Why didn't you get up when the bus driver asked you?' I say it felt as though Harriet Tubman's hands were pushing me down on one shoulder and Sojourner Truth's hands were pushing me down on the other shoulder. I felt inspired by these women because my teacher taught us about them in so much detail (Rumble, 2018).

Colvin credits her teacher's lessons for inspiring her courageous act of leadership; however, research indicates that Black girls may have few opportunities to learn about Black women leaders in detail or develop their own identities in contemporary middle school environments. For instance, research indicates that only 10% of books in 2018 featured African or African American characters, while 50% of books featured white characters (Cooperative Children's Book Center, 2018b). However, Black girls consistently aspire to lead and/or consider themselves leaders despite these barriers to learning and development (Fleshman & Schoenberg, 2011; Girl Scouts, 2014). At a time when Black girls are beginning to ask important questions and receive supportive (and unsupportive) feedback about their identities from the middle school environment, it is critical to examine what messages students are receiving about their identities, particularly messages that encourage leadership and self-acceptance. The current study explores which Black women leaders Black girls can readily identify, as well as how Black girls define and describe leadership. Findings have implications for how we can better support the leadership development of Black girls in middle school.

Method

Participants

We recruited Black girls in sixth, seventh and eighth grade from a summer program for Black girls, located in a mid-sized, Southern city (n = 21). In the City, nearly 50% of the population was African American. During the school year, most students attended predominantly Black,

racially segregated public schools. Girls' ages ranged from ten to fourteen years old (M = 12). In the nine-week summer program, formed almost twenty years ago with a mission to empower girls of color, Black girls explore science, technology, engineering and math in a culturally affirming space. We collected data within the first two weeks of students' enrollment in the program.

Procedure

We collected data through individual and focus group interviews as well as observations. In the interviews, we asked Black girls to reflect on their identity development and schooling experiences. Sample questions included: "What's the best part of being a Black girl?", "What does leadership mean to you?" and "Name some Black women leaders." The interview also included a self-portrait activity where girls reflected on how teachers, peers and family members would describe them. All interviews were audio recoded. Following data collection, a team of researchers transcribed, cleaned, and preliminarily processed all group and individual interview recordings.

Data analysis

In the current study, we used an inductive analysis process via mapping and writing around data (Bhattacharya, 2017). Inductive analysis refers to "approaches that primarily use detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (Thomas, 2006, p. 238). The data analysis process involved an iterative process of reading, writing, reflecting, visualizing, and debriefing with peer and subject matter experts. From this process, we summarized the raw data and conveyed key themes and processes. Throughout the process, we drew upon Black feminist perspectives that emphasize the importance of privileging and centering the voices of Black women and girls in research as well as acknowledging both the marginalization and resilience among Black girls (Collins, 2002). We prioritized quotes and rich descriptions to highlight Black girls' voices and experiences in their own words.

Results

Black girls' identification of Black women leaders

To identify which Black women the girls were able to list, we asked the girls to "name some Black women leaders."

Table 1. Names of Black women or girl leaders.

Names of Black Women or Girl Leaders
Michelle Obama
My mom
Oprah Winfrey
Maya Angelou
Program Leader (Sister Gloria)
Queen Latifah
Coretta Scott King
Rosa Park
Madam C. J. Walker
Rosa Parks
Maggie Lena Walker
Solange
Hailie Thomas
Taraji P. Henson
Zendaya
Beyoncé
Rihanna
Nicki Minaj
Brandy
Mikaila Ulmer

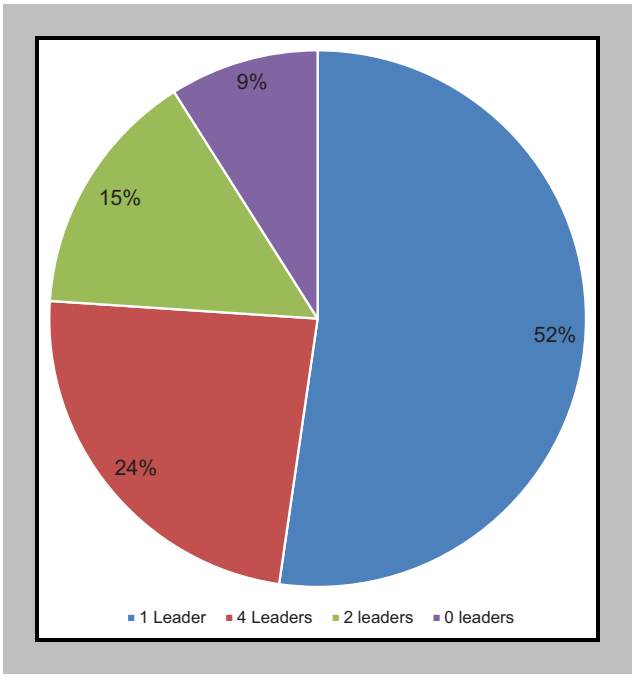
Black girls listed a range of Black women and girls, representing a variety of ages, careers, and types of leadership (See Table 1 for a full list of Black women leaders identified by the girls). Eleven girls were only able to list one leader (52%). Five girls listed four women (24%), three girls listed two women (15%), and two girls could not list any Black women (9%). See Figure 1 for a summary of the data.

Michelle Obama (N = 8 girls) was the most frequently listed icon and Oprah Winfrey (N = 4 girls) was the second most frequently listed leader. Zen described why she picked Michelle Obama, responding,

> Leaders–Black women leaders–Someone to guide the way–I think I really like Michelle Obama. She really opened up a lot of doors for many people on how she and President Obama were the first black people in office. So, I think that really opened up a lot of minds to other Black women on what they can become and how high in life they can achieve if they really set their mind to it.

Four girls listed female members of their families and/or community in addition to prominent Black women icons. Daviana, for instance, said "my mom, Michelle Obama, and I don't know anybody else." Brooklyn listed "Oprah, Michelle, my mother -in my mind." La La said "I think

Figure 1. Black girls' identification of Black women leaders.



Coretta Scott King. I think she was a big leader. Rosa Parks, Madam CJ Walker, and I think the next one is going to be Sister Gloria (the summer program leader)." Miya described how she selected four women, Maya Angelou, Sister Gloria, Oprah Winfrey, and Queen Latifah "because all of them started from nothing and they felt like they wanted to inspire others. So, they stepped up to the plate and they did it!" Notably, two girls listed adolescents Hailie Thomas, a youth health activist and Mikaila Ulmer, a social entrepreneur who launched a lemonade company, "Me and the Bees Lemonade" at the age of four.

Leadership, in their own words

Girls provided detailed responses to "what does leadership mean to you?" The two main themes were that leadership meant trailblazing or forging your own path and leadership meant supporting others. According to the girls, trailblazing or forging your own path meant "taking the lead," "doing your own thing," "to set an example," and "to don't do what the other person does." They emphasized that leaders did not follow peers because it could lead to "trouble." Sydney provided a long description of what it means to lead as a Black woman, discussing that leading may include coping with the negativity of others. In part of her description of leadership, Sydney said,

> I just know leadership means to me like when you keep your head held high. When I see other Black girls walking around with their head down, I'll be like, just hold your head up. What is there to be looking at the ground for? You have no worries. Anything that swings your way, you just brush it off your shoulder because at the end of the day, you know it's not true. People are going to have their opinions. People are going to talk. It's just how it is. That's the world. People are going to talk all their life.

According to Jamilah, being a leader is not "follow[ing] people around because if you do you can always end up going on the wrong track and doing things you never wanted to do in life." Other girls' definitions also identified the importance of leading and "not getting in any trouble" and "not being a bad influence." Amanda said that by avoiding trouble, leaders excel in school, saying, "leadership means so much to me, by showing things that nobody else can. Being kind, nice. Not getting in any trouble. Getting good grades. Being the nicest person you can be. Showing people that you care for them."

Leaders as sister's supporters. Many girls' definitions of leadership centered on supporting others, particularly other Black girls. To Miya, leadership meant "being the one that everyone looks up to, being the person that inspires everyone else, and that's what I want to be." Jayla said leadership requires "help[ing] other girls who are struggling know that they are somebody instead of nobody." Some girls' definitions stressed the importance of supporting others because of their marginalized identities. North, for instance, said that leadership is "being in charge of people, like being a role model, you get to show younger kids especially Black women how to act."

Discussion

Existing research on leadership has largely ignored the perspectives of youth, particularly the views and perspectives of Black girls. In centering the perspectives of Black girls, this paper provides important insight into which leaders Black girls identity with and what leadership

means to them. First, most Black girls in the sample were only able to list one Black woman. To the girls, for example, Michelle Obama, "guides the way" and women such as Maya Angelou and Oprah Winfrey "inspire." Second, girls' definitions of leadership, in part, were in alignment with previous definitions that emphasize taking the lead and setting an example. The definitions also appeared to align with the key developmental questions of "who am I?" and "how do I fit in?" that adolescents often ask during their middle level years of education. Being a leader, from the girls' perspective, often meant making positive life choices that keep you on the right path –even if that path means going in a different direction than your peers. Additionally, girl's definitions of leadership also emphasized that leaders support others, particularly other Black girls.

Implications and future directions

Black girls' definitions of leaders include qualities they possess or can develop throughout middle school, either independently or with the support of educators and peers. Being a role model, setting an example, and being your sister's supporter, for instance, have the potential to promote engagement as well as identity development, which is especially important as Black girls cope with race and gender bias and discrimination (DeCuir-Gunby, 2009; Spencer et al., 1997; Verhoeven et al., 2019). For middle school educators, it is important to not only understand how Black girls define leadership, but to be critically reflective of how their own classroom practices can encourage Black girls to develop their own leadership identities inside and outside of the classroom. Accordingly, the task at hand requires understanding the many complexities of our students through critical reflection, support, collaboration, and action.

Future directions

Educators can support the leadership development of Black girls by teaching more about historical as well as contemporary Black women leaders.

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The results of this study showed that most of the Black girls who participated in the program could only name one or two Black women leaders, and some of the girls in the study could not name one. Teaching about Black women leaders can help Black girls see themselves and their depictions of leading within school. Young, Foster, and Hines (2018) stressed the importance of Black girls seeing their identities reflected in the curriculum writing, "When the only images that Black girls see of themselves in the classroom are rooted in their dehumanization, it sends messages of disaffirmation and educational neglect that may never be emancipated" (p. 104).

To send affirming messages about Black girls' identities, educators can incorporate authentic and accurate lessons that center Black female leadership by utilizing critical literacy spaces, which have proven to be an effective model for Black girls to see themselves as leaders. Through critical literacy practices, Black girls can explore stereotypes and biases as well as learn about Black women leaders like Claudette Colvin or Naomi Wadler (McArthur, 2016; Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, 2015; Yosso, 2002). For example, Muhammad's (2012) case study of a Black adolescent girl, Iris, showed that in a summer writing institute, Iris wrote about her life experiences as a way of trying on various lenses, or her different, intersecting identities as a Black girl, and to make meaning of her experiences. These practices in the classroom can help Black girls explore the possibilities of their own leadership skills, while also aiding them in critically examining the portrayal of leaders.

As educators committed to supporting today's leaders in your classrooms and schools, especially Black girls, we also recommend asking the following ten preliminary questions about classroom pedagogy and practice to ensure every Black girl feels like she can "run the show:"

1. Does your classroom consistently include the contributions and work of Black female leaders?
2. Do the posters, photos, decorations, bulletin boards, and general classroom space reflect the diversity in the classroom?
3. When examining your classroom library, do the messages of your selected text highlight asset-based narratives of Black girls? Are they an integral part of your curriculum and instruction?
4. When teaching specific periods in history or using historical examples in classroom conversations, do

these discussions or lessons highlight the many contributions of Black women and girls? Have you added additional unique Black history examples to provide more depth and context to the core curriculum?

5. Do you know who the leaders are in your local community? Have you invited these leaders to the classroom to share more about their work?
6. Do your lessons about leadership allow Black girls to define and describe leadership and provide their own examples of leaders? Do your lessons also provide an opportunity for Black girls to identify leaders they would like to learn more about?
7. How do you give students opportunities to show their understanding of leadership in diverse formats? For example, can students demonstrate knowledge in artistic ways, such as creating a song or rap, by building or drawing a model or map, by creating a social media post, or by doing a performance?
8. Do you support students who lead outside of school (e.g., by organizing and/or attending protests or marches)? Do you have brave conversations with students about bias and discrimination?
9. How do you create opportunities for Black girls to lead in the classroom or support other sisters during class in a collaborative work environment?
10. How do you inspire and encourage Black girls to use their talents and passions as leaders to make a difference in their community?

Educators can apply the findings from this article and answers to the 10 questions above to their own school and classroom environments, reflecting on their own classrooms and interpreting what the representation and inclusion of Black women leaders might convey to their students. Then, educators can visit each other's classrooms and brainstorm a path forward. This may also serve as an opportunity for Black girls to take the lead in the classroom or pedagogical redesign, serving as directors, mentors or organizers.

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