

Literacy 4 Brown Girls: An Explorative Study Centered on the Identity and Literacy of African-American Girls

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Abstract

The academic needs of African-American girls too often are not linked to their intersecting identities. These interlocked identities often go unseen, thus are rarely addressed in K-12 schools. Specifically, their identities are neglected in some of their English Language Arts classrooms through the sole use of hegemonic literary practices. Literacy 4 Brown Girls was implemented at a midwest school for twelve weeks. The purpose of this case study was to explore the ways in which a literacy collaborative, designed with the identities of African-American girls in mind, might impact the identity construction of 12 African-American girls at a local school. Through careful document analysis, findings from this study reveal that African-American girls require school programs that focus on honoring, uplifting, and supporting the construction of their intersecting identities. Not doing so posits that the identities of African-American girls are unimportant and perpetuates their academic neglect and disengagement.

Keywords: *intersectionality, African-American, girls, literacy, identity*

Introduction

Throughout United States' history, African-American females have been seen as *less than* when compared to Whites and males (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981). K-12 academic institutions are no exception. In addition to African-American girls being singled out as disobedient or defiant and “pushed out” of schools (Evans-Winters, 2005; Morris, 2016), they are often classified as struggling readers and writers (Price-Dennis, 2018). This disproportionality of academic failure is in large part due to a cultural and historical disconnect; meaning, teachers fail to understand the direct association between a person's culture, how they are viewed by society, and their academic output (Sutherland, 2005). Sutherland (2005) connects identity to literacy when she states, “how one thinks about herself is revealed and reshaped as she writes and talks—the stories she tells reveal identity, are shaped by identity, and shape identity in the proves of being told” (p. 370). Failure to acknowledge the unique experiences of African-American girls stifles their identity construction while simultaneously limiting their academic achievement. Thus, K-12 schools that do not honor African-American girls and their identities serve as perpetuators of unfair practices that disproportionately harm African-American girls.

In light of conversations centered on the stifling of African-American girls, there has been a discussion on the importance of making room for the identity construction and academic advancement of African-American girls in K-12 schools. Specifically, the literature highlights the ways in which society has devalued the sets of experiences these girls bring, even though teachers are not always adept at acknowledging, affirming, or making space for their identities (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Price-Dennis, 2018). Making space for the identity construction of African-American girls can begin to help acknowledge their unique qualities, characteristics, and ways of knowing by placing their experiences at the center of pedagogical practices; creating these spaces can also serve to “challenge the deficit perspectives of young Black women” (Price-Dennis et al., 2017, p. 15) and to force educators to take a closer look at the association between the identities of African-American girls and their academic experiences.

The intersection of race, gender, and class are prominent in societal structures (Crenshaw, 1991). The way in which African-American girls are viewed, treated, and expected to behave in schools directly connects to their neglect in the classroom. If teachers are not able to address stereotyping, to understand the perpetuation of hegemonic beauty standards, or to critique marginalization as problematic in the classroom, how can they

create a curriculum that rebels against these acts of injustice? The answer is simple: without recognition of these practices that are disproportionately experienced by African-American girls (due to their raced, gendered, and classed positions in society), African-American female students are neglected. Relatedly, ignoring this population sends the message that their experiences, interests, and various learning styles are irrelevant.

With such a wide achievement and suspension gap, due to lack of cultural awareness (Crenshaw et al., 2015; Morris, 2016; Williams, 2017), African-American girls and their learning needs should be put at the forefront of academic discussions. In order to help achieve the inclusion of African-American girls and their needs in their learning experiences, we must acknowledge and support the identities of African-American girls. One way in which we can support their identities while supporting their academic needs is through the implementation of a literacy collaborative (Muhammad, 2012; 2016). A literacy collaborative, which is defined here as a comprehensive literacy program infused with identity-based curricular materials, can serve as an identity-making space that can simultaneously support the academic advancement of African-American girls. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore a literacy collaborative and its impact on identity for African American girls answering the question: How can a literacy collaborative, designed with the identities of African-American girls in mind, serve as a safe *other* space for the identity development of African-American, adolescent girls? In order to effectively answer this question, additional insight into the unmet needs of African-American girls in K-12 schools must be presented.

Literature Review

The misperceptions experienced by African-American females can directly impact African-American girls in their K-12 schools (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Davis, 1981; hooks, 1981; Morris, 2016; 2019). The perceptions and stereotypes some teachers possess regarding African-American girls' identities are associated with their academic output and, consequently, can directly impact how they are treated, viewed, and expected to behave in schools.

Fordham (1993) provides an example of the maltreatment of African-American girls in schools when she discusses gender passing in the academy and outlines how white womanhood is the standard by which women of color are judged. This of course becomes problematic when African-American women seek to achieve a level of womanhood that is

never really attainable due to their intersecting identities. Fordham (1993) addresses this when stating “they are people ‘passing’ for someone they are not: the white American female and, ultimately, the white American male” (p. 23). Taking Fordham’s (1993) discussion of the intentional silencing of African-American women demonstrated by their forced passing, Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) modernize the conversation, showing how African-American girls being forcibly overlooked, underappreciated, and devalued in schools because of their unique intersecting identities as African-American and female. They state that “because of racism, sexism, and class oppression in the U.S., African-American girls are in multiple jeopardy of race, class, and gender exclusion in mainstream educational institutions” (p. 13).

Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010) call for a critical race feminist lens by which African-American girls’ academic experiences can be reflective and inclusive of their unique lived experiences. Morris (2016) extends this discussion by highlighting how this multiple jeopardy, as addressed by Evans-Winters & Esposito (2010), works to push African-American girls out of schools. In Morris’ work, she looks at the intersection of identities amongst African-American girls in schools in relation to their “push out.” Morris (2016) chronicles events in K-12 schools that speak directly to injustices faced by African-American girls that are rooted in a distorted view of who they are. Morris (2016) addresses the policing of African-American girls (to be discussed in later sections) and how that policing interrupts and taints the students’ academic experiences. The narratives obtained by Morris (2016) point to unfair systems in K-12 schools that contribute to “poor academic and behavioral performances” (p. 195).

Scholars recognize the importance of acknowledging the intersecting/interlocking identities that lead to the oppression, marginalization, and devaluation of African-American women and girls. The Black Girls Literacy Collective, consisting of English scholars Muhammad, Price-Dennis, Haddix, Womack, and McArthur, address the neglect of African-American girls in English Language Arts (ELA) classrooms and curriculum. They highlight the importance of creating curriculum centered on the unique experiences of African-American girls if the academic system hopes to effectively educate them. Morris (2007) addresses the intersecting identities of African-American girls in relation to femininity and how they are viewed in the classroom. He also calls out schools for perpetuating the cycle of injustice by “reproducing inequality in these areas” (p. 3).

Aligning with E. Morris’s (2007) work highlighting schools’ inability to address the needs of African-American girls and their unique identities, Sutherland (2005) speaks to

the need for an intersectional lens in her work with African-American female high school students. Sutherland (2005) “explored the identity representation and construction” (p. 365) of the girls she worked with as they read *The Bluest Eye*. In this study, Sutherland’s (2005) participants explored the text and found representations of themselves and their lives. The text and the conversations that followed helped participants to identify intersecting identities and the oppression that is associated with them. Similarly, Sealey-Ruiz (2007) talks about recognizing the importance of including the lived experiences of African-American women in school curriculum in her work focusing on the academic engagement of adult, African-American female students. She posits that creating a curriculum that is centered on the lived experiences of African-American women increases their engagement in classrooms and with the curriculum. While her work is with adult African-American female students, her findings, which acknowledged that the use of a culturally relevant curriculum “gives them opportunity to deconstruct negative stereotypes about them and uncover praiseworthy aspects of their history and culture” (p. 58), are applicable to African-American female students of all ages.

Brown (2013) also makes space for a culturally relevant curriculum, though not through text. She created a performance group for African-American girls, SOLHOT, and recognizes the importance of making space for Black girls whose voices are often left unheard. Aligning with Crenshaw’s structural and political intersectionality discussion, Brown (2013) states that SOLHOT “is about a way of thinking about the world that foregrounds the full humanity of Black girlhood, rather than colluding with institutions, interpersonal interactions, and larger social and political systems that thrive on neglecting Black girls and depend on their disposability” (p. 6).

Due to the misperceptions and ill portrayal of African-American women and girls, and the consequential neglect African-American girls experience in their K-12 schools, scholars and researchers have discussed the need for and/or created safe, *other* spaces for African-American girls to thrive, learn, and, most importantly, construct their identities (Greene, 2016; Muhammad, 2012; Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Wissman, 2011). These *other* spaces should provide opportunities for African-American girls to read about relatable experiences, discuss their societal positioning and how they can actively combat that standing, and write about their lived experiences.

As an educator and researcher dedicated to uplifting and supporting the identities of African-American girls in K-12 schools, I felt compelled to create a program that reflected the criteria mentioned above in order to effectively address their most unique needs. As a

result, I founded a literacy program that met those criteria. *Literacy 4 Brown Girls* is a literacy program designed to support the misunderstood and neglected identities of African-American girls in K-12 schools. The program was first piloted as a 12-week, afterschool literacy collaborative that met twice a week for two hours. The 12 fifth-grade, African-American girls that participated in the literacy collaborative read culturally relevant texts, participated in restorative practices such as *sister share*, and created collective art pieces and individual writings that reflected the issues most pertinent to their lived experiences.

Methodology

The literacy collaborative met for a total of 22 sessions over the course of three months. The duration of each session was two hours and occurred outside of school hours, in the school library, from 3 p.m. until 5 p.m. In the literacy collaborative, the girls read *Dyamonde Daniels*, a text highlighting the life of a young, African-American girl; freely wrote about issues of importance to them (free journaling); answered and discussed writing prompts related to the text; created artwork representative of their desires and self-perceptions; and participated in several discussions centered on the experiences of African-American girls.

Research Site

Midwest School is located in a bustling part of Milwaukee's Northside and serves over seven hundred students; over ninety percent of this population is African American. Schools located on this side of town must contend with issues such as high poverty. This was evident through the school's participation in the Community Eligibility Provision program, which provides free breakfast and lunch to all students (USDA, 2019). Though bussing is available, many of the students who attend Midwest School reside in the area. The surrounding area is filled with homes and businesses; however, the school itself is situated on a hill, separated from the commotion of its environment. While the school is surrounded by beautiful vegetation, and what seems like endless acres of land, the physical appearance of the building is drab and uninviting. The neutral colored exterior does not lend itself to what one imagines as a school. On the contrary, it models many of the city's correctional facilities. Each morning, students are dropped off in a "parent drop-off/pick-up" line. Cars pull up to the front of the school, one by one, and students are hurriedly ushered into the building. The monotony of Midwest School's morning routine, paired with

its physical appearance, was a stark contrast to my previous experiences with other K-8 schools.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used in the selection of the 12 participants. Purposeful sampling is used in qualitative research that seeks to find individuals most knowledgeable about the phenomenon or case of interest (Merriam, 2009; Patton 2002). Since this study focused on the identity construction of fifth grade African-American girls, participation in the literacy collaborative was limited to those girls who met the following criteria: students must be female, African-American, English speaking, and in the fifth grade..

Recruitment of Participants

Prior to beginning recruitment, I met with two members of the administrative team to explain the purpose of this study. Over the course of an hour, we discussed the study, ethical criteria that had been met, and potential outcomes. Both members of the administrative team displayed excitement and engagement throughout our meeting. After deciding on the best days and times to host the literacy collaborative, we agreed to send out flyers to parents of all of the fifth-grade, African-American girls at Midwest school to begin the recruitment process.

L4BG Flyer

To begin the recruitment process, I emailed a flyer to the administrative team to be distributed to parents. This flyer explained the purpose of the study and the events that would take place. The administrative team paired the flyer with an email and phone blast that invited parents to attend an informational session to learn more about the literacy collaborative.

Parent Meeting

During the parent meeting, I reviewed the intent and importance of this study with the five families that attended. The parents, girls, and I discussed the need for programming centered on the identities of African-American girls and what they hoped to gain from participation in the literacy collaborative. Four of the five parents and girls who attended agreed to participate in the literacy collaborative. I was not made aware why the fifth family declined participation. I collected those four consent and assent forms prior to the close of our informational session.

Classroom Recruitment

Since this study was designed to include 10-12 participants, I needed to conduct additional recruitment at Midwest School. I was later invited to come in to speak with girls from two fifth-grade classrooms and present them with information on the literacy collaborative. I began with speaking to the girls in Mrs. Norm's classroom. We discussed commonalities as African-American females and the intent and purpose of the study. At the close of this meeting, I distributed consent and assent forms to the girls and requested that, if the girls were interested, they must return the forms before the end of the week.

I then went next door to Mrs. Ashwood's classroom, but she requested that I come back another time. I followed-up with her via email asking when a better time might be to come in and discuss the study with the girls. She agreed to allow me to come in the following day. Much like the classroom discussion before, I met with the girls in Mrs. Ashwood's class and distributed consent and assent forms requesting their return the following day.

After following up with the administrator, I learned that she collected over twelve consent and assent forms from girls. Since the flyer highlighted that participation was on a first come, first serve basis, I accepted consent and assent forms from the first twelve girls. However, at the start of the collaborative, only eleven of the girls showed up. One of the girls who confirmed participation had conflicting engagements. Therefore, after the start of our literacy collaborative, I granted additional permission to one participant. Teacher and administrative participants were recruited based on their classroom experiences with the girls (*e.g.*, Mrs. Ashwood taught nine of the twelve girls who participated in the literacy collaborative). All participant assent and consent forms were collected and securely stored.

Data Collection

For this study, I utilized interviews, field notes, and document analysis as data sources. As the researcher-facilitator, I conducted all participant interviews. Pre-literacy collaborative, mid-literacy collaborative, and post-literacy collaborative student interviews took place at Midwest School for no more than twenty minutes. Pre-literacy and post-literacy collaborative teacher interviews were conducted via phone and lasted for one hour. Lastly, administrator interviews were conducted post-literacy collaborative and lasted for an hour.

In addition to interviews, I recorded field notes throughout the twelve-week literacy collaborative. Field notes are a key component of qualitative research and help support interview data by providing additional insight that might not have been captured through participant responses. I recorded short phrases or words that would prompt greater thought after the end of each session. This method allowed me to stay present during literacy collaborative sessions while aiding in subsequent recall processes.

The last methodological practice used for this study was document analysis. Scholars have discussed the effectiveness of using document analysis in case studies (Bowen, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994) and as a complement to other qualitative methods. Participants wrote in their journals at the start and close of each literacy collaborative session. When journal topics were not closely aligned to our text, they were often “free-writing” sessions where the girls were able to reflect on their experiences and share what they were feeling.

Data Analysis

For each data source—interview transcripts, field notes, and documents—I was careful to first read the data, line by line, and then record my initial thoughts in the margins of the interview transcripts, journals, and field notes. Next, I recorded my thoughts and interpretations of the data in memo books. Finally, I created preliminary topical, descriptive, and analytical codes (Richards, 2005), driven both by the literature and data, which reflected my initial findings. This cycle occurred continually within and across data sources until I reached data saturation.

For the purposes of this paper, the analyses of the journal entries provided by the girls will be discussed. Though findings from interview responses and field notes suggest that this literacy collaborative aided in the identity construction of the 12 African-American girls, the journal entries, which often reflected the neglect, trials, experiences, and misperceptions of African-American girls, reveal a level of identity construction paramount to understanding the necessity of identity-based programming. After each literacy collaborative session, I collected the journals, read them, and recorded my thoughts in a memo book. I reported back to participants each week with my initial analyses of their writings. This helped to ensure that my understandings of participant writings aligned with their intent.

Findings

Journal entries served as a means of expression for the girls in Literacy 4 Brown Girls. Often, the girls desired to complete “free-writings” (a chance to write about topics of their choosing), which revealed how they were treated, depicted, and devalued both in school and society. Literacy 4 Brown Girls afforded the girls a safe, *other* space to use their pens to talk back to those who did not seek to understand or support their identities. Literacy 4 Brown Girls not only made space for girls to talk about issues pertinent to their identities and lived experiences, but also created an environment where girls could express pride in who they were, despite what the world might tell them. Using the phrase of one of the girls, it was the “kinda program” that the girls at Midwest School craved.

“This Kinda Program”

During free-writing sessions, girls often wrote about their excitement for a program that was intentionally designed with their identities in mind. Though their school day curriculum and experiences did not consider their unique societal positioning, our program did. Pictured below are journal entries that reveal how “*this kinda program*” was desired and necessary for the girls at Midwest School.

Image 1, Lauren.

“I like that we have this kinda program at school because we are learning about a black girl and natural hair. And I like how the book talks about odd and even numbers.”

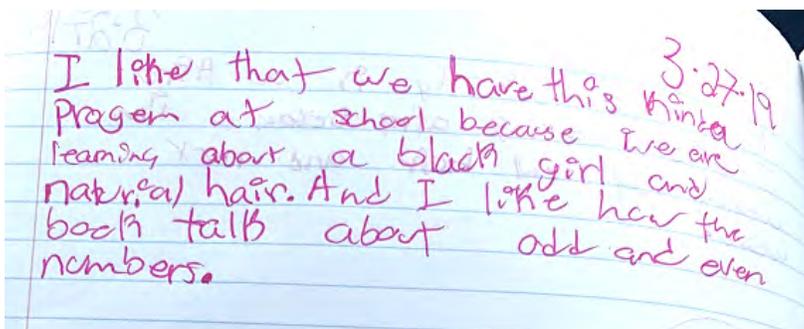
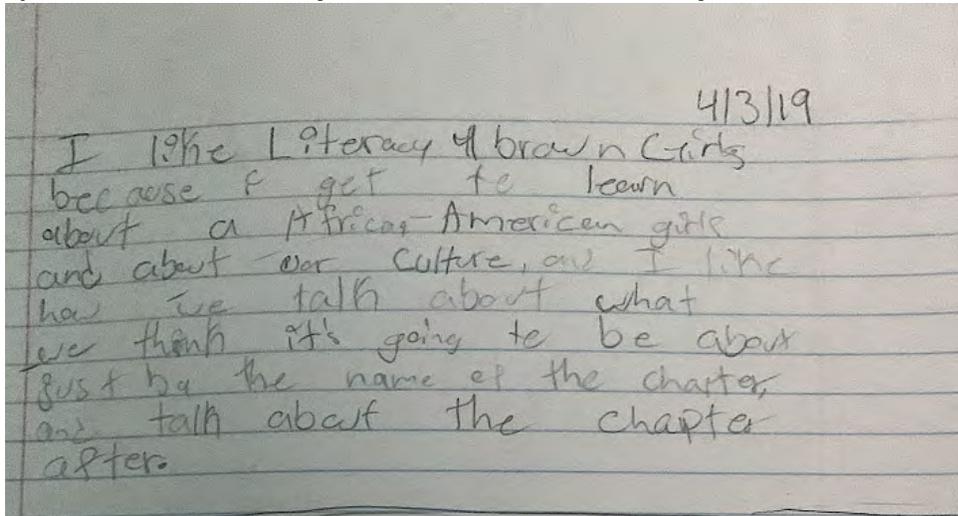
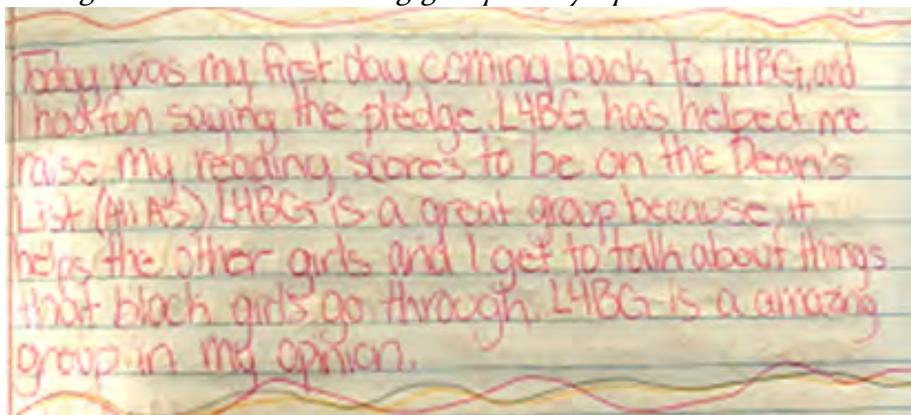


Image 2, Ashley.

“I like Literacy 4 Brown Girls because I get to learn about a African American girls and about our culture, and I like how we talk about what we think it’s going to be about just by the name of the chapter, and talk about the chapter after.”

**Image 3, Angel.**

“Today was my first day coming back to LABG, and I had fun saying the pledge. LABG has helped me raise my reading scores to be on the Dean’s List (all A’s). LABG is a great group because it helps the other girls and I get to talk about things that black girls go through. LABG is an amazing group in my opinion.”



“This kinda program” suggests that such programs did not exist at Midwest School. Lauren and Ashley both shared how they appreciated that the program focused on their identities. Being able to read, write, and talk about issues relevant to their lived experiences afforded the girls space to be unapologetically themselves. Additionally, Angel shared how

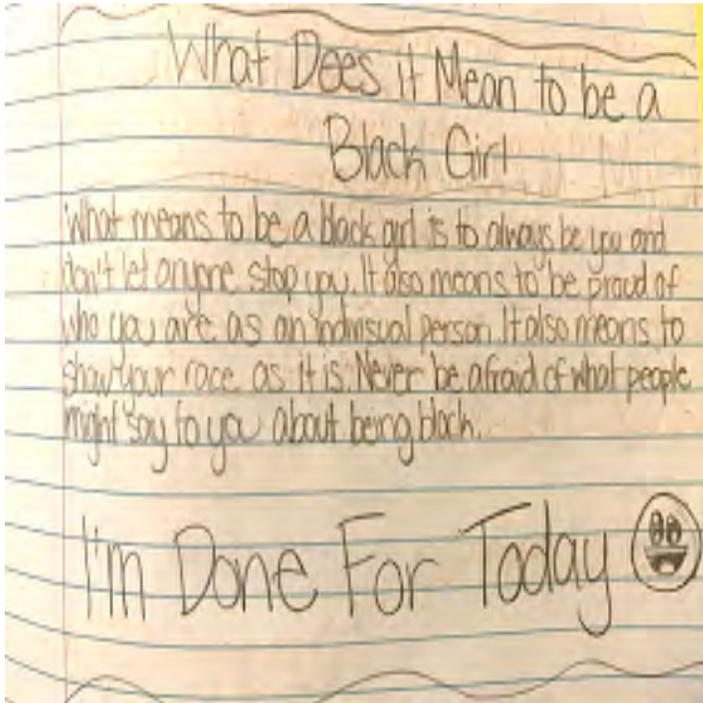
the program was “great because it helps the other girls and I get to talk about things that Black girls go through.” Throughout the twelve-week program, many of the girls would share similar sentiments. The desire for “this kinda program” echoed throughout our space often. Other girls in the program began to share how they wished Midwest School offered this program year-round instead of some of the other programs that they believe did not reflect their needs or interests. It became evident that due to their unique intersecting identities, and the consequential maltreatment, misperceptions, and neglect, these 12 African-American girls required more from their school, staff, and extracurricular programming. They needed to be *seen*.

“What It Means to Be a Black Girl”

For these girls, being seen meant making others aware of their lived experiences. Others needed to understand what it meant to *them*. Thus, it was imperative that Literacy 4 Brown Girls created opportunities for the girls to discuss their lived experiences and how they were unique to their intersecting identities. During a journal session, the girls were instructed to pretend that they were on the news and to share their experiences as an African-American girl. As pictured below, the girls responded with narratives of resiliency, pride, power, and uniqueness.

Image 4, Angel.

*“What Does it Mean to be a Black Girl: What means to be a black girl is to always be you and don’t let anyone stop you. It also means to be proud of who you are as an individual person. It also means to show your race as it is. Never be afraid of what people might say to you about being black.
I’m Done For Today.”*

**Image 5, Ashley.**

“Black Girl: One word to describe Black girl is Queen because being black is unique and special. If I could describe myself in one word it would be sass. What would you describe me as?”

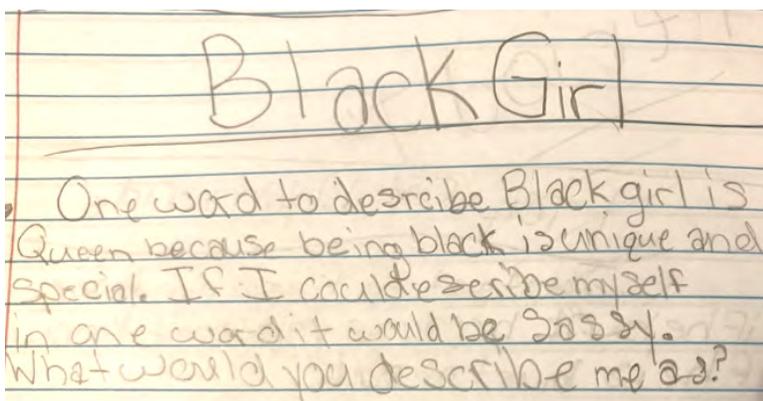
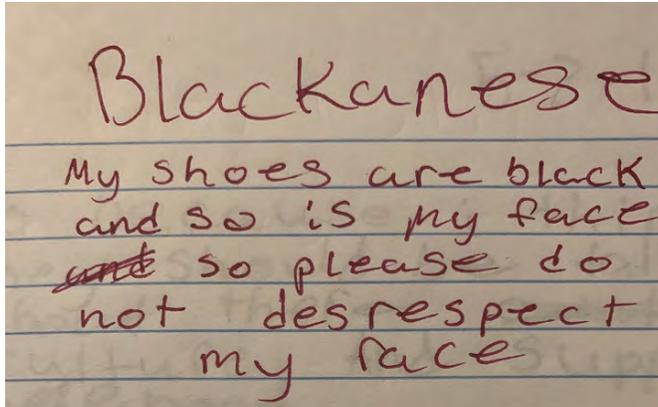
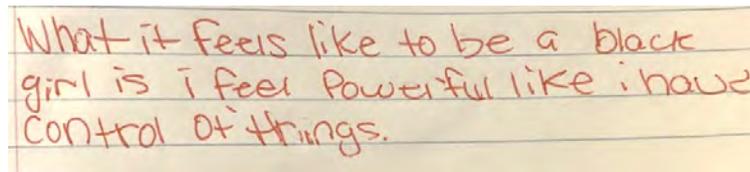


Image 6, Jasmine.

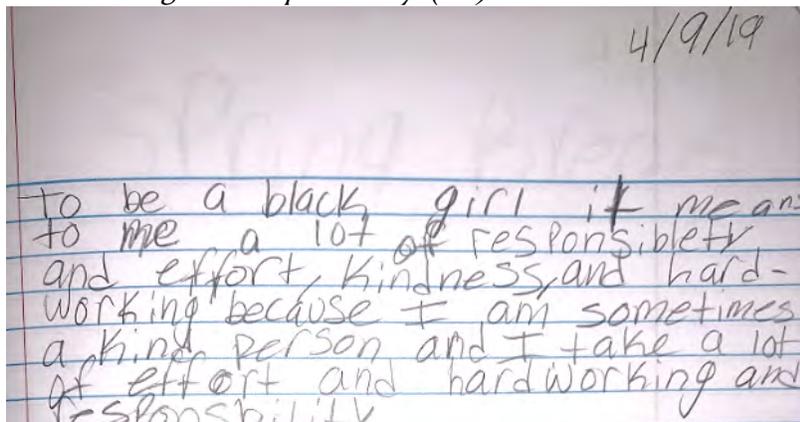
Blackanese: My shoes are black and so is my face so please do not derespect (sic) my face”

**Image 7, Autumn**

“What it feels like to be a black girl is I feel powerful like I have control of things

**Image 8, Hannah.**

“To be a black girl it means to me a lot of responsiblety (sic) and effort, kindness, and hard-working because I am sometimes a kind person and I take a lot of effort and hardworking and responsibility (sic).”



As shown in the above journal entries, several of the girls in the program described feeling pride about being a Black girl, but also noted the trials they must endure. Though being an African-American girl in this society constitutes misperceptions, maltreatment, and neglect, it did not hinder the girls from expressing their pride in their uniqueness, strength, and power. Thus, being a Black girl simultaneously means experiencing societal pressures and stress while walking in your power, light, and beauty. This dual consciousness (DuBois, 1903) is one that African-American girls must learn to navigate on a daily basis. To be a Black girl meant to be in constant struggle with who society says you are and what you hope (or in the case of these girls, demand) that they see.

Discussion

As the findings from this study reveal, Literacy 4 Brown Girls served as a safe *other* space that provided 12 African-American girls the space to safely discuss their identities and the ways in which they shape their everyday experiences. Literacy 4 Brown Girls aided in the construction of the African-American girls' identities by creating a space where their identities mattered. The girls felt seen and understood thus allowing them to freely display their authentic selves. Consequently, the girls' desire for such programming was evident, and discussions pertaining to their intersecting identities occurred each time we met. Affording African-American girls the space and opportunity to discuss issues pertinent to their lived experiences values their identities and substantiates their worth. It would seem, then, that these types of programs should be implemented in all schools since African-American girls are disproportionately neglected, pushed out, and overlooked across the nation. Creating programming informed by the intersecting identities possessed by African-American girls can help to eradicate these disproportionalities by placing their needs at the forefront.

Concluding Thoughts

Creating spaces of representation for African-American girls is paramount to not only their academic success, but their feelings of worthiness, respectability, and value. Administrators, teachers, and other school personnel have a responsibility to explore the implementation of such spaces if they seek to truly understand, support, and aid in the cultivation of African-American girls' intersecting identities. In a society that dehumanizes,

brutalizes, and disproportionately penalizes the minds, bodies, and spirits of African-American girls, it is our responsibility as educators to stand on the front lines and protect them by any means necessary. By protecting and valuing their identities, we demand that the world #SayHerName and collectively work to prevent the neglect of African-American girls' most important intersecting identities. To not do so further posits that their identities and lived experiences are unimportant and perpetuates their academic push-out, disengagement, and neglect.

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