EXPLORING THE DEVELOPING CRITICAL LITERACIES OF ADOLESCENT BLACK GIRLS IN INDEPENDENT SCHOOLS

Charlotte E. Jacobs, Ph.D.
University of Pennsylvania
Context Matters: Black Girls in Independent Schools

- Black girls’ status as “the outsiders within” (Collins, 1986; White, 2013)
- Experiences of microaggressions about their academic abilities and admissions status (Jacobs, 2017; White, 2013)
- Valued socially for being “cool,” but still remain outside of the social scene (White, 2013)
- Hypervisible status when it comes to school policies, discipline, and their emotions (Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Jacobs, 2017; White 2013)
Focusing on the Work

Think about the Black girls in your school that you either teach, coach, or work with in some capacity:

What strengths or assets do they bring with them?

What are some of the academic, social, or emotional challenges they experience?
Definition of Black Girl Critical Literacies (BGCL) (Jacobs, 2017)

- The phenomenon in which Black girls use particular competencies to **recognize, process, and respond** to messages that they receive connected to their status as Black adolescent girls in U.S. society while simultaneously **crafting their own sense** of their Black girl identity.
Theoretical Roots of Black Girl Critical Literacies
Theoretical Roots of BGCL: Positive Youth Development for Adolescent Girls of Color

(Clonan-Roy, Jacobs, & Nakkula, 2016)
Black Girl Critical Literacies in Action

Chelsea Gardner’s TEDxYouth@Hewitt talk, “How Can We Empower Girls of Color?”
Black Girl Critical Literacies in Independent Schools: The Key Components
School Culture: Schools as Sites of Socialization

Schools serve as one of the main purveyors of sociocultural knowledge that youth receive around topics of race, gender, and status.

(Brown, 2012)
School Culture: The Mythology of “Safe” Spaces

- The maintenance of the “Culture of Niceness”
- The ongoing invisibility of Black girl emotions
- The ever-present context of symbolic & actual violence
Um, I think our school--how I feel here is like that we are treated like so differently and like – I think we’re kind of held to, like, a higher standard in some things, like we should be like more understanding, like, of the White students if they don’t understand something about race. Or like if a White student like tweets something ignorant...or like the N-word or something, it’s like we have to be the ones that are like understanding and like, “They didn’t know better, and this or that.” But if like something happens to us and we’re like, if like, one of us tweets the N-word it’s like World War III and like someone was taken in front of like a board [the disciplinary board] and it’s called like “Black supremacy” and then like, what are you talking about because there’s like 2 percent of us in this entire school?

- Kendra, 11th grade
Turn & Talk: School Culture

- What does school culture look like in your school in relation to the lives of Black girls?
  - What are the traditions, practices, policies and programs in your school that communicate to Black girls that they belong in the school?
  - What are the traditions, practices, policies and programs in your school that communicate to Black girls that they are “outsiders within”?
Critical Consciousness

- The growing awareness that Black girls have about how social relations and identities operate within the larger context of power relations, and how they as individuals and as a group are situated within those contexts.

- Continual reflection about one’s identity and status in relation to power, and action that leads to the transformation of power relations, systems, and institutions (Freire, 1970/2011)
Components of BGCL: A developing critical consciousness

Now because I’m kind of aware, I have more confidence than when I was like 11 or 12. And I always thought, ‘Oh, I need to be like, light skinned and have straighter hair,’ so I was always straightening my hair, and like during the summer I didn’t want to go outside like for fear of tanning and stuff like that. And I think now when I see those messages I’m like, ‘Wow! That’s a shame that we teach the young Black girls not to love themselves right from when they are young.

– Jennifer, 10th Grade
A Developing Critical Consciousness: Suggestions for Action

- Strategic questioning & conversations tied to identity, power, and privilege
- Reflection activities about who they are, who they want to be, how they want to get there
- Integration of current events and their lived experiences into the curriculum

*Turn & talk:* What elements of your school or classroom culture could support Black girls’ developing critical consciousness?
Components of BGCL: Emotional Literacy

- The awareness that Black girls have of their own emotions and the decisions they make to display those emotions.

- Black girls’ awareness of how their emotions might be viewed by others because of the stereotypes, images, or assumptions associated with one of their identities.

- The ability of Black girls to be able to read others’ emotions.
I hated middle school so much... And it’s like, I don’t know, like, keeping things bottled up those three years... ninth grade it was so different. Like, it was so much freedom... everything just...[snaps] the little things, like set everything off... Maybe I got it all out of my system, or ... maybe I’m able to, like, communicate with other people about different situations better than I was... I don’t have to sit and think about it all by myself. – Tanya, 12th Grade, Grace School
Emotional Literacy: Suggestions for Action

- Journaling
- Calculate-Locate-Communicate-Breathe-Exhale (Stevenson, 2013)
- Role Playing (Stevenson, 2013)
- Brené Brown “The Power of Vulnerability” TED Talk

Turn & talk: What elements of your school or classroom culture could support Black girls’ developing emotional literacy?
Explores how **critical consciousness and awareness interact to influence the decisions and actions** that Black girls make when involved in encounters that sit at the intersection of identity and structural oppression such as race/ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, religion, ability, language, and age.

The **agency that Black girls use to define themselves in the face of being defined by others** on a daily basis, as well as the methods that young people use to advocate for themselves and for the equity of oppressed and marginalized groups.
Elements of BGCL: Agency & Activism

Check Yourself Checklist

- Apologize *that*.
- Acknowledge that you might not know.
- Be prepared to get uncomfortable.
- Common sense!!
- If you’re not sure, *ask*.
- Don’t speak over people in a group that you have privilege over.
- Get backup. Calling out your friends is hard!
- *EDUCATE YOURSELF*

GCP SDLC Presentation, “Check Yourself Checklist”
Agency & Activism: Suggestions for Action

■ Creating a framework and norm in your school/classroom that resistance is healthy and natural.

■ Strategic conversations– What do they want to change? Who are their allies?

■ Provide spaces for them to talk about school policies, practices, and traditions where they feel targeted, invisible, or don’t meet their needs-- a homespace or homeplace

■ Work with girls to brainstorm ways to effectively cope with stress– create a “self-care” plan

*Turn & talk:* What elements of your school or classroom culture could support Black girls’ agency & activism?
Adult Allyship for & with Black Girls

- **Intersectional allyship:**
  - Recognize and discuss intersectional differences and similarities between you and your students.
  - Emphasize intersectional histories in feminist activism so that girls can prevent similar mistakes in the future.

- **Intergenerational allyship:**
  - Recognize the power dynamics that usually occur between younger and older people.
  - Leverage the knowledge that people from all ages bring to the work.

- **Create connections to networks of resources and deploy them:**
  - Different populations will have different needs during this time (mental health resources, legal advice, connections to social services, health care, etc.).
  - You can play a powerful role in directing girls towards critical resources, and helping them to direct others towards resources.

Final Words: Black Girls’ Recommendations

- “Actually listen to us, and make an effort to make a change. We aren’t as scary as the Anglo-Saxon school thinks.”

- “I wish that the school would make the topic of not only race, but any controversial topic more open for discussion.”

- “Be understanding of what we go through.”

- “Seeing more Black female faces in presentations, textbooks, powerpoints, books. Talking about more topics in classrooms so other students can recognize that seeing a Black face is just as normal as seeing a White face. Integration in all aspects is key!”

- “People need to be aware and conscious of microaggressions and not making assumptions based on skin color.”
References

Thank You!

Contact Information

Email: chjacobs@upenn.edu

Twitter: @CharlotteJ_PhD