Critical Black Feminist Mentoring

A Framework for Making Black Girls' Lives Matter

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In the wake of current sociopolitical movements, research on the lives of Black girls and women is gaining momentum. However, studies providing Black girls space to voice their experiences within learning and afterschool environments remain a crucial—and often ignored—component of this conversation. Such conversations provide Black girls with the opportunity to counter dominant negative and stereotypical narratives, to define what Black girlhood looks and feels like, and to become leaders and agents for change. Research centered on Black girls is useful for enhancing afterschool programs and school curricula and for providing insight into the emotional struggles Black girls continue to face within and beyond their learning environments. Research exists exploring the significance of mentoring programs that center culture and identity in the lives of Black girls (Weiston-Serdon, 2017), but a need remains for the examination of intersectional identity, experiences of oppression, and tactics to combat oppressive forces through the programming and practices of mentor programs.

This study had three primary objectives. The first was to identify ways mentoring programs provide participants with a safe space to tell their stories—shifting traditional hierarchies of power that often place Black girls on the lowest rung by exploring the role of dialogue within program activities. The second was to examine a mentor initiative that directly engages with middle school Black girls where they spend most of their time: at school. The third was to offer counternarratives opposing the one-dimensional depictions of Black girls in middle school that shape public discourse. I hoped to elicit

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these counternarratives using dialogue, consciousness-raising based on the program curriculum, and steps to create change. The counternarratives highlighted the intersections of race, class, and gender and the ways in which Black girls are required to navigate the minefield of hazards associated with an intersectional existence.

Afterschool mentorship programs are one intervention that can provide Black girls with the opportunity to interact with people who want to listen to, support, and guide them through the various stages of their personal development. This article explores the multidimensional and intersectional experiences of Black girls as they relate to schooling; narratives of resistance; and curricula, programs, and initiatives that center Black girls.

Critical Black Feminist Mentorship: Centering Black Girls' Voices

In reflecting on the creation of theory in communities shared by Black women, Black feminist theorist bell hooks (1994) expressed that shared lived experiences of Black women are linked to processes of "self-recovery, of collective liberation" (p. 61) and fulfill the function of empowerment and freedom—when the goals are to transform and empower. Thus, a theory that is intentional about centering the specific experiences of Black girls was necessary in examining the mentorship model that is the subject of this study.

On completing the study's analysis, I saw that concepts related to Black feminist pedagogy, Black feminist thought, and critical mentorship were significant components but were not sufficient as individual theories to account for the findings. Thus, creating a critical Black feminist mentoring theory was necessary. Critical Black feminist mentoring combines the components of all three theories and adds to literature on critical mentorship and Black feminist epistemologies and practices. Additionally, components of the theory are similar to what Huff (2019) advances on intersectional identity development and perspectives on an ethic of care. Huff (2019) theorizes that those who mentor Black girls must have an understanding of the components of social identity fostered by the individual, culture, and community to effectively support adolescent Black girl development. Similarly, mentorship with Black girls demonstrates a capacity to encourage sisterhood, which can lead to solidarity through the use of dialogue and intentional support, thereby creating spaces where Black girls can freely develop their individual and collective voices (Brown, 2009; Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). Within these free spaces, Black girls are given opportunities to counter toxic and stereotypical ideas about Black girlhood. Dialogue can serve as an opportunity for Black girls to develop their voices and intergenerational relationships—relationships that can lead to the positive development of Black girls (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011). "To engage in dialogue is one of the simplest ways we can begin as teachers, scholars, and critical thinkers to cross boundaries" (hooks, 1994, p. 130). Finally, Huff (2019) suggests that critical mentorship with Black girls encourages consciousness-raising through intentional activities and dialogue, as well as activities that happen organically. These opportunities have the ability to teach Black girls to resist varying forms of oppression.

Furthermore, critical Black feminist mentoring builds on Huff's work (2019) by emphasizing the importance of mentors understanding intersectional identity development and the significance of mentorship grounded in a Black feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000). Intersectionality provides an opportunity to connect identity to historical, social, cultural, and political systems in a way that heightens the girls' and researchers' understanding of Black girlhood. It also provides an understanding of the injustices and inequities that must be resisted through consciousness-raising and activist work. A Black feminist ethic of care causes an understanding of the importance of connection as a means of survival and humanization. In White patriarchal and capitalist societies and social institutions, engaging and reciprocal care is not seen as significant and is often questioned as unethical and unprofessional; however, mentorship with Black girls necessitates this type of care and understands it as an act of resistance.

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Critical Black feminist mentoring is a useful model in countering the deleterious experiences adolescent Black girls have in formal educational spaces. It combines components of Black feminist pedagogy, Black feminist thought, and critical mentorship as outlined in Table 1.

Methods

Because the primary goal of this study was to understand the experiences of Black adolescent girls in middle school—and to assess their understanding of those experiences—a qualitative approach was employed that used phenomenological interviewing techniques and ethnographic observations of one university-community collaborative mentorship program in the 2016–2017 school year. When working with multiple methods, researchers have a responsibility to engage in reflexive practices as a means of understanding how their own experiences are both similar to and different from those of participants in the research (Hemming, 2008). To remain attentive to researcher positionality and potential biases, I meticulously maintained a personal journal and field notes throughout the process. Additionally, an ethic of care was utilized throughout the study to promote self-reflection and mindfulness in shaping how the information was collected, so that shared (or similar) experiences would not silence participants' voices within the research (Pratt-Clarke, 2010). Amplifying Black girls' voices and providing them with the space to write their own scripts and narrate their experiences in middle school was a primary concern in the study. I understood the girls in this study to be the experts of their own experiences; therefore, they were asked to tell the stories of middle school life that were of supreme importance to them.

Participants

Participants in this study were 11 Black public middle school girls (grades 6–8, ages 12–14) enrolled in an afterschool program partnered with a mentor program coordinated by Eastern Michigan University. The afterschool program staff informed the Black girls in the program of an opportunity to participate in a research study. Those who were interested attended an information session with me; 11 of the 14 girls in attendance expressed interest in participating in the study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Project BIG is a university-sponsored afterschool program that meets once per week. This mentoring initiative is a partnership between a university, a community middle school, and an on-site academic support program. University students enroll in a mentoring course that meets twice weekly and uses a critical Black feminist and intersectional curriculum. The course also provides ongoing training to prepare a diverse cohort of students to create and run project-based activities at the middle school that meet state-required social-emotional learning and project-based learning (activities fostering empathy, creativity, initiative, and reflection) outcomes for afterschool programs. Students in the course are encouraged to think critically about the socialization of young people and the potential for personal and social change through mentoring and academic service learning. Project BIG's curriculum is one of the significant ways middle school girls

Table 1. Critical Black Feminist Mentoring Connections and Sources

Component of Critical Black Feminist Mentoring	Connections and Sources
Intersectional identity development	Black feminist pedagogy (Huff, 2019), Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000)
An ethic of care (Noddings, 2002) that creates safe spaces offering dialogue and counternarratives	Black feminist thought (Collins, 2000), critical mentoring (Huff, 2019)
Intergenerational relationships showing the importance of connection as a means of survival and humanization	Black feminist thought (hooks, 1994), critical mentoring (Huff, 2019)
Consciousness raising, empowerment, strategies for resisting oppression, community building, and sisterhood	Black feminist thought (hooks, 1984), critical mentoring (Weiston-Serdan, 2017; see also Huff, 2019)

can develop their leadership and social-emotional skills, and femtors serve as positive college role models Project BIG participants can emulate. (This study uses the terms *mentee* and *femtee* interchangeably, as well as *mentor* and *femtor*—with the understanding that femtors are university student mentors trained in culturally responsive, intersectional, feminist mentorship models.) Although the number of university students fluctuates semester to semester, the femtors are able to continue their mentorship work after completing the course and act as leaders for incoming cohorts in subsequent semesters.

I am a Black woman who created the curriculum for the mentor program and acted as an observer during the mentor training process and sessions with the mentees. I conducted two semi-structured interviews, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes, with 11 participants. Consent to participate in the study was granted by school administrative staff and parents or guardians, and the girls assented before the interviews began. Interviews were conducted in comfortable, private rooms during lunch or afterschool program activities. Open-ended questions were utilized, and follow-up questions were developed based on participants' responses. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

To analyze the data, I used NVivo software and the word frequency function in Microsoft Word to code the transcripts and notes from the interviews to determine the most prominent topics or issues discussed. Several common themes emerged from analysis of the interview data. Prominent in the participant narratives were discussions of the interactions between the femtees and femtors, the ethic of care in mentoring, femtee–femtor relationships, and voice—or lack thereof—within the school environment. In addition to discussing the complexities of their experiences with bullying, microaggressions, and in-school violence, the participants spoke of the significance of a model such as critical Black feminist mentoring. Additionally, through participant observation and feedback, the girls in the program were able to inform the application of critical Black feminist mentoring.

Results

Intersectional Identity Development

Mentorship without a focus on the intersections of identity and experiences with intersectional oppression fails to address the many challenges faced by marginalized adolescents (Weiston-Serdon, 2017). Thus, opportunities to support positive racial, gender, class, and general social identity development of Black girls are imperative. Activities in the program, such as dialogue circles, encouraged personal and group reflection and discussion about stereotypical perceptions and treatment due to ideas of beauty, race, and gender, as well as about how the girls saw themselves fitting within those definitions. Ultimately, the goal was to promote a positive body image and self-concept as they related to participants' identities as girls. The girls in this study shared several statements that addressed the support provided through the program as a whole and specifically by the femtors; this support also fostered an empowered form of identity development.

During one dialogue circle, I observed a balance between participants who were insecure because of being teased about their skin tone and hair texture and those who demanded that all mentees be confident in their race and proud of their beautiful ethnic features. For example, "Justine" (all names are pseudonyms), who has struggled with bullying due to her legally blind status, questioned the idea that someone would be insecure about their skin tone and race: "You are beautiful the way you are. Why are you insecure about your own color and your race?" By contrast, Shia discussed the stereotypes in society and in school about Black girls and academic success: "They say, 'Black kids don't care about their education' or 'They're stupid.' … I made honor roll for first quarter, second quarter, first semester, and second semester so far." Shia further shared she felt comfortable because her femtor supported her when they had opportunities to discuss Shia's personal experiences. She emphasized that one of her femtors even met her mother; femtee and femtor were able to share experiences outside the program. This sharing further increased her comfort with the femtor—both inside and outside the program. Building comfort in this relationship was easier due to the shared identity of the femtee and the femtor. Girls and women need mentors who are of the same racial identity and can share lived experiences and similar struggles, as these affirming opportunities promote academic, social, and cultural success (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011).

Development of Individual Voice

The opportunities for sharing during the dialogue circles in the program and during individual sessions outside the program increased the girls' ability to

share hurtful, as well as joyful, experiences. Critical mentoring emphasizes the importance of supporting this type of sharing as a means of developing a collective understanding. For Black girls, because of their experiences of being silenced and victimized in formal educational settings, mentoring spaces are perhaps one of the only places that allow them to develop their individual voices. Black girls need people in their lives who will encourage them and create opportunities for them to develop and share their stories (Brown, 2009). The girls in this study illustrated how the program provided these opportunities. Shia said the program gave her a chance to speak in a way that was authentic to her: "I was always able to say what I felt and share ideas. It made me feel good: like I was important and that I mattered." Similarly, Tracey alluded to her ability to be open in the program and said that this ability created a sense of belongingness for her: "It made me feel like I could talk about stuff and not be scared about it.… It makes me feel wanted, that I have someone on the Earth who actually cares about me." The mentoring space gave Tracey an opportunity to disclose her experiences and views without being judged; it provided her with the company and support of other Black girls and women. The creation of opportunities to use their voices to describe experiences, to resist poor treatment, and to support each other leads to agency among Black girls.

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Agency is central to the sustainability of Project BIG, which has featured opportunities for the femtees and femtors to shape the future of the program since its inception. During sessions, femtees and femtors often have opportunities to propose and facilitate activities if a preplanned activity is not working or if the session is disrupted due to circumstances during the school day. During one observation, this process occurred organically after a particularly rough day at the middle school. The mentees arrived to the session with low energy; many of them remained quiet as the activity began. One of the more active students in the program stated there had been a lot of drama during school that day. She then asked one of the femtors to play some music to cheer people up. The planned activity required each person to take a section of a banner to draw pictures and cut words and pictures out of magazines to describe how they would address various forms of injustice. Some of the students worked quietly with their femtors, coming up with a couple of ideas to address injustice. One of the students stated she should write a play and include everyone's ideas. This suggestion modified the guidelines for the banner activity, but it provided each student with the opportunity to share their ideas and enabled everyone to work together to design the play. During the session, more femtees began to request songs, and the activity grew into a community-building session in which everyone had an opportunity to share their ideas to address racism, sexism, ageism, and other forms of oppression. The success of the banner activity informed future sessions led by the femtors, who began to incorporate listening to radio-edited hip-hop, pop, and rhythm and blues into many of their sessions. This activity highlighted the importance of merging creative opportunities with traditional activities and of preparing femtors to accept changes to sessions when the needs of the femtees take priority over scheduled activities.

Opportunities for mentee contributions are a normal part of the mentor program. Mentees provide feedback at the end of each session, reflecting on what went well and what they would change. This feedback informs how the mentors shape upcoming sessions and provides the mentees with a sense of purpose and ownership within the mentor program. Youth participatory action research and a critical Black feminist mentoring model promise to intentionally build upon the voices and agency of the girls in the program. Youth participatory action research as a method of observation and analysis works with youth, in this case the Black girls in the program, as a means of engaging in a collaborative process of critiquing various aspects of the program and developing counternarratives to otherwise deficit-based responses to violence and trauma. By empowering the girls to lead activities in the face of hurtful acts and share their knowledge with educational administrators and program coordi-

nators, the program enabled the girls to see their lives in a larger context.

The feedback from the past few years of Project BIG has ultimately shaped the curriculum and changed the organization of femtor and femtee relationships from a formal pairing to an organic experience. Overall, the opportunities for individual and collective voice, as well as agency within the program, cannot be analyzed in a silo, but instead must be understood as part of a larger dedication to solidarity based upon shared experience and an ethic of care.

Community Building: Solidarity and an Ethic of Care

A critical Black feminist mentoring model fosters the development of sisterhood and notions of solidarity, using an ethnic of care (Collins, 2000) as a means of building that solidarity. The girls in this study spoke to these ideas more frequently than any other component of the framework. Pia described her relationships with the femtors and how they encouraged her to build friendships with other girls in the program: "They put you in different groups with different people you normally don't hang out with, so you got to work together as a team.... It is fun because I get to express my feelings."

As carers, the femtors held the responsibility of supporting the girls in the program by sharing stories of solidarity and modeling how to navigate society and the communities in which they belong. Caring also looks like sharing personal experiences through dialogic opportunities (Collins, 2000); solidarity is fostered in the ability to connect through shared struggles. For example, Aritha shared, "[The dialogic opportunities] made me feel like other people had stuff, not just me. Like other people been bullied and had different [struggles] I didn't know they had." Additionally, Jazmine shared that the support of her femtors made her more self-confident: "It made me feel that I could do more than I thought." Jazmine's response is one example of the power in femtor support. She further described how her relationships with the femtors in the program encouraged her to succeed and pursue future choices:

> [The support of femtors] makes me feel like I can have somebody to rely on, and then when I actually succeed in what I want to do, I can go back and thank everybody for being there for me, when nobody else was.

What becomes clear is that solidarity should not be considered as separate from an ethic of care because together they demonstrate the power of the femtor–femtee relationships. The power of these relationships is evident even when it occurs during homework pep talks such as the one Kim described: "I was struggling in math, and then the one girl was, like, 'Just keep trying it and never give up,' and then I never gave up, and now I'm, like, really good at it." Part of the ethic of care from a Black feminist perspective is to demonstrate and act upon the idea of social responsibility (Collins, 2000). The femtors in this program demonstrated their ideas related to an obligation to serve as guides through conversations and encouragement. Tracey described an incident in which her femtor encouraged her through feelings of insecurity:

> When we played the games, sometimes I didn't want to play 'cause I felt like some of the people didn't like me, but the person that guided me through it, she was all nice about it, and she persuaded me to play the games.

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The femtor who assisted Tracey created a sense of belonging that encouraged her to participate during other sessions. This encouragement happened with other girls in the program, such as Pia, who described the comforting relationship she had with her femtor: "I feel like she connects with us, like she actually sits down and talks to you. She's, like, 'I went through this, too,' and I think that's what kind of got me close to her."

One of the significant aspects of the mentoring program was the development of supportive relationships between the femtees and the femtors that embodied a Black feminist ethic of care (Collins, 2000). These intergenerational relationships encouraged compassion for all involved participants and fostered a closeness the femtees perhaps had not felt in formal

educational spaces or often in their families and community. Additionally, these connections humanized the femtees' experiences, thus equipping them with survival strategies and support systems. The critical Black feminist mentoring model offered fluidity for the femtees to self-select different femtors in different situations, thus building solidarity and community.

Consciousness-Raising and Resistance

Finally, the critical Black feminist mentoring model presented opportunities to engage in dialogue and consciousness raising, which in turn equipped femtees with the skills necessary to transform their social worlds. During the program, the consciousness-raising and education were not always about historical forms of oppression; sometimes they were about confronting everyday microaggressions. Justine, for example, shared that the program provided space for her to feel better about herself: "They teach me not to be afraid and to stand up for myself and not watch others get bullied, which I hate seeing." Other opportunities for consciousness-raising and resistance were found in the activities associated with the curriculum dealing with the history of women and people of color. Jazmine described one such activity:

> We did some research on history, Black history, mainly female history. And then we drew a picture of ourselves and wrote under it how pretty we were and other [affirmations].… It made me feel good 'cause it was, like, when I don't look in the mirror I can look at that picture and see a bunch of stuff that *I am* instead of saying I'm not pretty and stuff like that.

Jazmine further explained that she was able to resist by taking action: "It's not that I'm [inferior] or anything; [the program] showed me … I have the choice to do more if I want to." Critical mentoring and critical Black feminist mentoring are designed to incite possibilities that move beyond the status quo (Wieston-Serdan, 2017). Tracey also brought up her experiences with the curriculum and its role in teaching her and her peers about histories of oppression; this learning led her to a heightened consciousness and the ability to critique the history traditionally taught to children:

> We learned ... how a long time ago, we were in slavery and the White people had more power.… There's a couple of other [rights] Black people didn't have.… I was wondering, why does our skin even matter? Like ... you know how Obama is Black and everybody thinks all the racism is gone and stuff, when it's really not.

The mentorship program helped the participants critically analyze topics often ignored in formal educational spaces and gave them opportunities to engage in difficult conversations that often led to a critical awareness of the political state around them. The discussions of these topics encouraged an understanding of the connection between historical forms of oppression and the present-day experiences of the girls. The realization that their current circumstances are deeply connected to the concerns of the past was a point of deepening awareness, which led to a desire to create change for themselves now and in the future.

Discussion

The girls' narratives disclosed experiences that demonstrated confidence in the face of bullying, microaggressions, and fighting in educational settings. The reflections about their experiences within Project BIG and their feedback about the success of the program, as well as the observations during their interactions with femtors and site leaders—interactions that were heavily influenced by the training of the femtors—all demonstrated the significance of utilizing a critical Black feminist mentoring framework to shape the curricula of mentoring programs involving Black girls.

Furthermore, the girls' reflections demonstrated the impact their relationships with the femtors had on the persistence and efficacy of the femtees. Similarly, the data collected demonstrated the significance of a mentorship model and program supporting the intersectional experiences of Black adolescent girls; the fostering of sisterhood, solidarity, and care of those serving and participating in the program; the creation of space for their authentic voices; and the opportunity to increase consciousness that leads to advocacy and action. The impact of the program and the benefits of femtor–femtee relationships are evident throughout the participants' reflections on and assessment of the program.

Implications

Efforts are needed to redefine how schools and society at large view Black girls. Throughout their lives, Black girls' identities and overall development are influenced by educational, familial, and societal factors. Many

normative ideas of development push Black girls into prescribed gender roles from the moment they are born; these roles are often in direct conflict with their own views of and expectations for themselves. Teachers, parents, and community members often encourage young Black girls who are otherwise confident and outspoken to be silent and "ladylike." The inclusion of Black feminist theory gives Black girls the space necessary to disrupt traditional notions of ladylike behaviors, which have been historically grounded in notions of White women's purity and chastity (Giddings, 1984; Sanders & Bradley, 2005). Forcing Black girls to conform to traditional definitions of gender roles places them in opposition to teachers, who are often unaware of their biases, and places these students on a path that jeopardizes their academic performance and future success (Morris, 2007).

Programs like Project BIG focus on intentional relationship building as well as the recognition of students' individual strengths, skills, and talents. Such programs offer students an alternative means of obtaining an education and provide them with a break from traditional methods of learning, thus increasing their ability to imagine a wider variety of future successes and possibilities for themselves (Neuman, 2010). These programs also place Black girls in a position to become a support system for their peers, improving their relationships with each other and thus creating counternarratives that stand in direct opposition to bullying cultures.

Additionally, it is important to illuminate and validate a variety of experiences to tell stories that disrupt the prevailing negative depictions of Black adolescent girls and youth culture. Black adolescent girls are a product of their total environment. How they experience that environment, filtered through multiple identities, impacts how they develop throughout their life cycle. More studies considering the intersectional perspectives associated with the adolescent development of Black girls, as well as varying modes for adolescent support and growth, are needed. Research discussing the relationships among educational institutions, families, and communities is central to the development of adolescent girls and can assist in creating and maintaining educational practices and policies that center the experiences and voices of Black adolescent girls.

The following are some considerations for educators and school administrators to support Black girls and other underserved student populations:

- Support marginalized students by implementing critical and Black feminist perspectives into staff training and middle school curricula
- Create and facilitate opportunities for a symbiotic relationship among afterschool programs, social workers, and schools with wraparound services benefiting the whole student
- Hire staff who reflect the racial and ethnic composition of the student population
- Include students in the creation of programs and trainings for teachers and staff and of programs for students
- Provide quality professional development grounded in theories promoting equity, social justice, and understanding for teachers, administrators, and staff

Critical Black feminist connections, practices, and programs are one way to nurture broken communities while improving the efficacy of the educational system as a means of overcoming the many barriers to success faced by Black girls and other marginalized youth.

Consistent and effective critical Black feminist mentoring, which provides a bridge among individuals, communities, and society, can be the framework used to inform these considerations. Critical Black feminist mentoring supports relationships that consider the intersectional experiences of Black girls and other marginalized youth, as well as the need for care-centered relationships. Critical Black feminist connections, practices, and programs are one way to nurture broken communities while improving the efficacy of the educational system as a means of overcoming the many barriers to success faced by Black girls and other marginalized youth.

Conclusion

Research on culturally responsive, inclusive afterschool programming exists because stakeholders, including researchers, students, parents, socially conscious schools, and community organizations, demand spaces of inclusion (Lindsay-Dennis et al., 2011; Simpkins et al., 2017). These spaces ensure

the full recognition of the identities, conversations, relationships, knowledge, and activism of Black girls. The spaces counter stereotypically acceptable notions of girlhood that tend to use Whiteness as the guide. However, more spaces are needed to promote positive experiences and analyze inequitable attitudes, behaviors, and policies. Opportunities that center the complex experiences of Black girls and help them to navigate the world around them are necessary.

As demonstrated in this study, mentorship following a framework that is understanding of the intersectional identities and development of Black girls can continue to demonstrate that Black girls are indeed magic, unique, and worthy. Project BIG employed opportunities for identity development, dialogue, interpersonal relationship building, consciousness raising, and action. The project is a formal program, but leaders must devise a plan to create and implement programs that follow similar tenets in educational spaces, communities, workplaces, and the global society. Doing so encourages more adolescent Black girls and Black women in general to learn effective strategies to challenge the cultural and social norms that uphold silence as the norm by enabling them to engage in dialogue and activism. Ultimately, through a critical Black feminist mentoring model, Black girls and women can use their voices in ways that are progressively empowering without penalty, censure, or psychological distress.

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