

Black Girls Negotiating Code-Switching: The Importance of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy in the Classroom

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Abstract

Literature that reflects and embraces the history and lived experiences of Black girls and women should be incorporated into school curricula. Implementing text and lessons about history and events of the lives of Black girls and women as well as books about and authored by Black women provides a space where Black adolescent girls can see reflections of themselves. This can help them to gain and maintain a solid sense of identity and belonging. Exposure to texts that reflect their lives can also illustrate for these girls that there is value in their lived experiences, including their linguistic and cultural code-switching. They can learn that their modes of expression and their perspectives are not disreputable but simply a part of their culture. Providing such a curriculum will pique these girls' interest in academics and help them find their voice and agency in the academic setting, which will empower them to participate in the classroom discourse.

Keywords: adolescent, Black girls, code-switching, culturally relevant pedagogy

Introduction

The motivation to write this piece stems from my personal experience as a Black female student who was not provided space in the classroom to be culturally expressive. Although this happened many years ago, Black girls are still having experiences similar to mine. Thus, it is imperative to have this conversation, but not only in the Black community, as we are not the only people teaching our children. Schools must confirm for Black girls that their cultural norms are not substandard but part of the fabric of who they are, including their lived experiences, their perspectives, and their histories. These also should be an integral part of Black girls' education.

The strong connection between culture and language has been a consistent thread throughout the history of the Black community. When enslaved people were brought to America, this legacy came with them, and it took root as a tenet of Black American culture. As these people attempted to build a functioning community, their songs created a system of coded communication that deepened their bond and also eluded the detection of slaveholders. Slave songs provided a way to arrange "shouts" and meetings, and even to share escape plans. The song lyrics also warned of "patty rollers" (patrollers), and often were sung as a way to offer one another support and encouragement to carry on (Ramey, 2008). The complexity of Black women's work songs is acknowledged in the book, *Put Your Hands on Your Hips and Act Like a Woman: Black History and Poetics in Performance* (Jackson, 2020). Songs sung by enslaved women as they did their backbreaking work fostered a collaborative environment that could be interpreted as an act of rebellion and resistance (Jackson, 2020). The history of these songs has become part of the narratives of later generations, which encourages Black girls to create their own forms of expression in the current context of life.

The relationship between language and culture and the variations within different ethnic groups have always been of major interest to me. Exploring how the dominant white society perceives Black ethnic groups based on their linguistic and cultural norms has been central to my personal and professional experiences, curiosity, and observations. Growing up as a Black woman in the United States has enabled me to be an active participant in various cultural communities where code-switching is a constant, even as the language spoken differs. The linguistic-cultural dance

of code-switching has always been normal for me. When with the Black community, I switch from Standard English to African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and embrace its spirited rhythm. This switching has been an effortless and natural process in my life, and my fluency is an exercise of power and liberation that has made me aware of the connection between language, culture, and power.

AAVE embodies a rhythmic flow of expression that is a joyous and natural form of group identity. The tongue of the Black community creates a safe, familiar space that is only for us, where outsiders cannot change or dismantle our aesthetic cocoon. It is ours, as reflected in our speech, music, dance, and other forms of expressions such as dress. For some this dialect has a protective factor, and they do not speak it in front of members of outside communities. It is part of a unique mask they wear, and it shields them from the critique of not speaking and articulating ideas in a form that White people often do not embrace or even acknowledge. Many in the Black community believe that the white community views our linguistic distinctiveness only as a bastardization of English and our gestures as inferior pantomimes designed to amuse and entertain. This is the duality of being Black in America.

Girls Who Look Like Me

Seriously focusing on how Black adolescent girls are viewed by white educators is for me a visceral experience. When I hear a Black girl attempt to express herself, I often think of the personal experiences I had in my youth. During my adolescence, I comfortably spoke Standard English, but my cultural perspectives made it uncomfortable to speak out during classroom exchanges. Even though I code-switched fluidly and with ease, there were countless times when my perspectives and experiences alienated me from my white counterparts, and my cultural identity seemed obsolete. My classmates and I read the same texts, but the words had different cultural connotations for me. I see Black female adolescent students facing this same dilemma today.

In one of my middle school English classes, we read a short story in which the main character was Black. At the end of the story, this character made a decision that was not intimated in the plot and our teacher encouraged us to guess what it was. My white classmates eagerly raised their hands, but all gave erroneous answers. To me, however, reading the story through a different lens than my peers, the main character's choice was obvious. I understood the familiar and relatable thought process of this character, who was Black like me, but I was uncomfortable sharing my answer because I was certain that my classmates and my teacher would not understand. Explaining my response would have been arduous, as no others in the classroom shared my Black cultural perspective. I knew that I should use Standard English in class and enjoy my linguistic group identity only when with my Black peers, but I still lacked the confidence to share my cultural perspective in class. I had a feeling of otherness and discomfort, that I had no agency and no voice. Although this occurred many years ago, these feelings are still prevalent when I am in academic settings; I often recall such experiences when I am among my educator colleagues and with Black adolescent female students.

As I moved into young adulthood and developed a self-assured cultural identity, I began to feel grounded and whole. This enabled me to question my understanding of the connection between Black culture and language in American society and to fully embrace my belief that code-switching is an asset that I should not hide or apologize for. When among members of the Black community, I still marvel at my unconscious fluidity of language and culture. Moving from one sphere to the other is a major part of my identity.

My Insider Observer Lens

When I became an educator 20 years ago, I added the observer's lens to my insider's lens on Blackness. I often observed how my colleagues scrutinized Black students and that teachers showed little respect for or acknowledgment of these students' cultural norms. Black students often were treated as though they were in dire need of cultural remediation. My colleagues questioned why Black students were not familiar with the vocabulary, vernacular, and experiences of the mainstream white culture. These questions seemed to be anchored in the belief that white American culture

is superior (Kohli, 2014). Teachers who treated Black students this way did not even attempt to understand the variations in language and culture or the lived experiences of these Black students, nor did they realize the impact their critical attitude had on them.

I also noticed how often teachers misjudged Black girls when they expressed themselves candidly in a linguistic and cultural format they found comfortable and authentic. The assessment rubrics for many Black girls were judgmental, relentless, and harsh, and they were addressed as if they had no right to their own girlhood experiences. Teachers often perceived the assertiveness in these young Black women's speech or mannerisms as classless, belligerent, or unruly, which often caused these girls to be cheated out of their authentic development into womanhood through the interrogation of self. These girls' attempts to communicate their points of view often were misunderstood or unacknowledged, and some teachers perceived the girls as unintelligent and incapable of participating astutely in conversations (Morris, 2016).

I have observed that, in addition to progressing through the traditional adolescent stages, Black girls must confront the intersectionality of race and gender-based discrimination in society (Crenshaw, 2017). They often are told to speak "proper" English and to discard other forms of expression, as though linguistic expression is a prescribed science rather than a distinct community characteristic. I make the distinction between "proper" and "standard," which are not synonymous, as the former merely refers to the way the dominant culture speaks (Baker-Bell, 2020). Teachers dismissing Black girls' standard ways of speaking often leaves these students feeling devalued and disengaged from the classroom discourse (Baker-Bell, 2020). I sometimes wonder why it matters if these girls do not demonstrate the ability to speak Standard English. This does not necessarily indicate that they can't contribute to the classroom discourse or that they do not have valuable insights and opinions. Moreover, at times they may intentionally not switch to Standard English because they need to emphasize a point in the vernacular that best suits their position (Baker-Bell, 2020). My conversations with colleagues suggest that Black adolescent girls are often deemed academically and intellectually deficient when they do not participate in classroom discussions or conform to the mainstream forms of expression.

Why I Do This Work

My concern as an educator is that many Black adolescent girls may be voiceless in the classroom because teachers shame their language and speech patterns. I strongly believe that the classroom should be a place with a sense of community and mutual respect. Black girls' lived experiences and chosen forms of speech should not be seen as negative or be treated with disapproval by educators and fellow students who are not Black. Where this is happening, Black girls may find themselves engaged in a constant battle to define their lives in the face of falsehoods and narratives that depict their lives in inaccurate or incomplete ways. This is why encouraging Black girls to form a positive self-identity should be a staple in learning settings, and educators should be prepared to make this part of their classroom instruction (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

Black girls often have shared their experiences and feelings with me about how they are perceived in school. One student recently said that she longed to read literature in class that was reflective of her life. She would like to read more books where the main characters are Black women and more books authored by Black women. She expressed feeling invisible in her English class because she felt so disconnected from the classroom literature. Black girls deeply desire a feeling of connectedness in the classroom, but such spaces are not often provided (Price-Dennis et al., 2017).

My observations have led me to consider possible solutions that could help to minimize these Black girls' feelings of otherness and invisibility and instead elevate and strengthen these adolescent Black girls' position in the academic setting.

Proposed Solutions for Black Girls' Space in the Classroom

Providing supportive spaces in which adolescent Black girls can articulate and express their thoughts and perspectives in classroom discourse is vital for their educational growth (Muhammad

& Haddix, 2016). I believe this can be actualized comprehensively and effectively if adolescent Black girls are able to hear and see themselves in the classroom literature.

First, teacher pre-service courses should include curricula that provide strategies for approaching Black girls' cultural and linguistic code-switching pedagogically. Second, culturally relevant literature should be an established component of the curricula. Literature that reflects the life experiences, language, cultural expressions, and perspectives of Black women could help Black adolescent girls develop and maintain a secure sense of identity. This is especially true at the middle school level, when adolescent girls are at a juncture where they are claiming a self-identity. These girls need to read about Black women and learn about the current events in their community that will influence and affect them. They need to engage with texts authored by Black adolescent girls and women so that they can make connections and receive affirmation that their cultural norms are not inferior. They need to be exposed to literature that presents the world unapologetically from the perspective of Black females. Third, space must be provided where these girls can openly discuss their perspectives on current events and their lived experiences, including their anguish, triumphs, and questions.

Another way to affirm Black adolescent girls in the classroom is to address historic events that involve Black women, which often are omitted or misinterpreted. For example, discussions of slavery rarely address the lynching of Black women, even though 15 states documented lynchings of Black women between 1886 and 1957 (DeLongoria, 2006). Black women's involvement in key historic events must also be presented accurately. For example, Rosa Park is often portrayed as a docile commuter who happened to speak up one day, but in fact, she was highly active during the 1960s civil rights movement (Gilbert, 2018). The female organizers of the recent Black Lives Matter movement are at times vilified and depicted as a troubled young hate group instead of as organizers and agents of change (Bandle & Cullors, 2018). These distorted views of Black women remain prevalent in 2022.

I generally see the same Black women being discussed in the schools a few times during the school year, particularly during Black History Month. In fact, there is a plethora of Black women who have made significant contributions to our society, and the brief mention devalues their impact, influence, and accomplishments. Moreover, this very limited portrayal of Black women's contributions clandestinely implies that only a handful of exceptional Black women are an important part of the American cultural and historical experience. I fear that this sends a message to Black girls that the Black woman's legacy in America is inconsequential. A more holistic and varied integration of Black women's important role in our global society is urgently needed. Educational settings should provide such information and simultaneously serve as an antidote for societal ills like racism and sexism. Black adolescent female students should be taught to be open-minded, critical thinkers with a sense of their honorable place in society. Most importantly, these students should learn about their history and their culture, just as they learn about the history and culture of the dominant, mainstream experience.

I sometimes find that my colleagues' lack of interest in the lived experiences of their Black students goes hand in hand with the lack of knowledge and inaccurate information about Black women. Teachers have a responsibility to be appropriately informed and to provide a well-rounded, balanced learning environment that offers information that is not tainted by stereotypes and benightedness.

Conclusion

Black adolescent girls need to know that they are viable, valuable citizens, that they do matter, and that people are interested in their lives. Educators need to remind these girls that they not only have a history but that the events and experiences of their lives, their music, language, and lifestyles, are making history for future generations. Black girls need to know that they contribute to history and that what they do in life will have an impact and leave a legacy.

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