



“Black Girl Magic is everything”: Recommendations for cultivating supportive spaces for Black girls

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ABSTRACT

The concept of #BlackGirlMagic has resonated with Black women and Black girls across the world. Black Girl Magic is as unique as a fingerprint and serves as an invitation for Black girls to be present as their true, most powerful selves. In reflecting on the power of Black Girl Magic for Black girls as 5 Black women in psychological science and education, we describe 3 recommendations for cultivating supportive spaces for Black girls to be magical. These recommendations can serve as an important starting point for future conversations and purposeful action.

CaShawn Thompson, the “mother of Black Girl Magic,” coined and created the concept that “Black Girls Are Magic,” which was shortened to the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic in 2013 to “uplift and praise the accomplishments, beauty and other amazing qualities of Black women” (para. 5) and to catalog the positive achievements of Black girls and women in society (Workneh & Thompson, 2021). Thompson created the hashtag to push back against the negative media imagery of Black girls and women. Now, in the 10 years since its inception, the hashtag has been used millions of times on Instagram, Twitter, Facebook and TikTok. In writing about the impact of the hashtag #BlackGirlMagic, Hobson (2016) wrote,

Combining rhetoric and visual treatments, #BlackGirlMagic insists on the visibility of Black girls and women as beauty subjects and aspirational figures in the wider culture to contest negative discourse that frames Black womanhood through the lens of dysfunction, unattractiveness, and social failures. (para. 7)

Perhaps most importantly, the concept of Black Girl Magic has resonated with Black women and Black girls across the world¹ (e.g., Mims, 2019; Rogers et al., 2021). Mims (2019) asked 21 Black girls in middle school “what does Black Girl Magic mean to you?” (Mims, 2019). The most common response from the girls was that #BlackGirlMagic means “power.” In addition to noting the sense of power, girls also underscored that Black Girl

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Magic was an inherent part of being a Black girl. Zoe (12 years old), for instance, said it means “you’re Black so be proud of it.” Amanda (11 years old) said “Black Girl Magic means so much to me. It’s like you have your own power that shines through you and everybody can see it.” For Sydney (14 years old), Black Girl Magic was a rallying cry to push back against stereotypes people have about Black girls and stand tall:

Black Girl Magic. Let me tell you something. Black Girl Magic is everything. It’s everything. You can go, you can do, and you can do what you feel like. You don’t have to be ashamed of what you do, what you create, how you look, how you walk, how you talk. You don’t have to be—you’re not ashamed of nothing. Black Girl Magic is magical. That’s all I can say about it. It’s magical. You can walk in a room full of people and you know all eyes going to be on, but are you ashamed? No. Because you already know, every Black girl has Black Girl Magic in them. [...] You have Black Girl Magic because Black Girl Magic is forever going to stick with you. It’s not going nowhere. You’ll always have magic in you, girl. And you’ve got to share it.

Unfortunately, Black girls often have to stand tall amidst experiences of bias and discrimination in education that threaten to disrupt their ability to thrive (Annamma et al., 2019; Cooper et al., 2022; McPherson, 2020; Morris, 2016; Morris & Perry, 2017). Specifically, age compression is a form of racial prejudice in which society regularly responds to Black girls as if they are fully developed adults, essentially interchanging Black girlhood with Black womanhood (Morris, 2016). A 2017 study found that starting as young as age 5, adults perceived Black girls as less innocent, more independent, less needing of support and comfort, and more adult-like than white girls of the same age (Epstein et al., 2017). This form of dehumanization can have harmful consequences for Black girls (Essien & Wood, 2021; Jean et al., 2022). For instance, Black girls are suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement at disproportionately higher rates than white girls. Importantly, they are also excluded from policies and the nurturing care they need to thrive (Lindsey, 2018; Wilson, 2021).

Educators, however, can play an essential role in ensuring that the magic of Black girls is celebrated, cultivated, and supported in schools by disrupting the harm that occurs in schools *and* by creating homeplaces, or “spaces of respite that center humanity, resistance, and joy, while cultivating healing, empowerment, and growth” (Mayes & Byrd, 2022) that promote Black girls’ learning and development. In reflecting on the power of Black Girl Magic for Black girls in education as 5 Black women in psychological science and education, we describe 3 evidence-based recommendations with best practices for cultivating supportive spaces, or homeplaces (hooks, 1990) for Black girls to be magical. We hope these recommendations can serve as an important starting point for future conversations and purposeful action.

Prioritizing Black girls’ articulations of Black Girl Magic

Before presenting our recommendations, it is important that the concept of Black Girl Magic does not perpetuate messages of dehumanization (Sesi Magazine, 2022). As #BlackGirlMagic began to trend on Twitter, Thompson watched it invalidate Black girls’ efforts (i.e., Black girls’ greatness happens magically, rather than intentionally through deliberate decisions and actions) and contribute to monolithic depictions of Black girlhood, which only highlight certain career and academic achievements (Mason, 2021; Sesi Magazine, 2022). In reflecting on what she wants the legacy of Black Girl Magic to be, Thompson said that

Black girls everywhere ... understand it's not about what you can achieve, it's not about what you can acquire, it's not about what someone bestows upon you, it's not about what someone tries to take away from you.

As such, Black Girl Magic in this article acknowledges that the *Magic* in Black Girl Magic is uniquely defined and conceptualized by each girl, like a fingerprint. Therefore, in this paper, we reject a singular definition of Black Girl Magic, honoring Black girls' resistance and agency as they define their own magic absent of disciplinary boundaries, restrictions, or qualifiers. It is an invitation for Black girls to be present as their true, most powerful selves, and for educators to learn from Black girls about the ways to create homeplaces (hooks, 1990; Love, 2019) within schools where Black girls can define and express Black Girl Magic. For example, Black Girl Magic shines when a Black girl is announced as the school's valedictorian (Noel, 2022) or the cover girl for a popular magazine (BET, n.d.). Black Girl Magic is also expressed when educators craft homeplaces for Black girls, spaces where Black girls can tell parts of their story through writing (Gibbs Grey & Jones Stanbrough, 2019; Mims et al., 2022), participate in meaningful leadership roles that support their personal growth (Hawkins, 2020), or engage in restorative practices that prioritize their wellbeing over others' expectations (Osaka, 2021; Walton & Oyewuwo-Gassikia, 2017). Below we highlight 3 recommendations for educators to craft homeplaces that create possibilities for this magic to occur.

3 recommendations for cultivating homeplaces for Black Girl Magic to flourish

Recommendation 1: Consider the gendered racial messaging we give to Black girls: Balance preparation with empowerment

Black girls are often subjected to negative messaging about who they are and who they are capable of becoming from peers and teachers (Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein, 2012; Butler-Barnes et al., 2023; Mims & Williams, 2020). Epitomizing homeplace as an act of resistance (hooks, 1990), Black caregivers construct a safe space for Black girls to learn to love themselves and be supported in their growth and development (Burnett et al., 2022; Cooper et al., 2020; Stokes et al., 2020; Thomas et al., 2013). Caregivers provide messages that include assurances of their beauty and self-worth, the importance of self-determination and independence, awareness of gendered racial hardship, and developing a sense of pride in being a Black girl (Brown et al., 2017; Thomas & King, 2007; Thomas & Speight, 1999).

In a recent investigation, we interviewed Black girls in the 6th–12th grades to better understand their school experiences and how these experiences shaped their understanding of Black girlhood (Burnett et al., 2022). In our sample, girls shared their experiences with gendered racism in their schools (e.g., being bullied because of their natural hair; disproportionate school disciplinary action). Further, participants made direct connections between the negative stereotypical portrayals of Black girls and the unfair treatment they experienced from teachers and school administrators (e.g., not being recommended for advanced courses by teachers). Despite this awareness, we found that Black adolescent girls were motivated to challenge and refute negative societal stereotypes of Black girls and their academic potential, attributing their confidence to the affirming messaging they received about being a Black girl from their parents at home. Beyond providing practical strategies to prepare their daughters to adapt and cope, caregivers provided an opportunity for their

daughters to be nurtured while exploring the joys of Black girlhood and all it had to offer. It is in this safe harbor of community where we see Black Girl Magic thrive without fear of being stifled or dimmed.

Yet, supporting Black girls' thriving must not rest solely with Black caregivers; it is a community practice. We all have a responsibility to affirm the Black girls in our lives. Educators and practitioners should partner *with* Black caregivers in the continued cultivation of Black Girl Magic to ensure that Black girls are not only aware of societal injustice but also feel empowered to resist. Black caregivers are already the champions of Black girls, guaranteeing that Black girls not only learn the required academic content but also feel valued in the learning process. Thus, we should acknowledge and learn from the expertise of Black caregivers—integrating their wealth of experience in our efforts to support Black girls' thriving across contexts. By taking this approach, we can create a culture of homeplace in educational settings that sees the magic within Black girls and invites them to further develop it.

Recommendation 2: Curate Black girl spaces with intention to reimagine notions of social belonging and support in educational settings

In addition to supportive and nurturing relationships, creating physical spaces and opportunities to belong is an important component in helping to support Black girls' overall well-being (Allen et al., 2016) and increase academic engagement, achievement, and persistence (Anderman, 2003; Matthews et al., 2014; Vargas-Madriz & Konishi, 2021). School belonging is most often defined as “the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others in the school social environment” (Goodenow & Grady, 1993, p. 80) and is considered a universal human need (Maslow, 1968). Yet, everyone experiences belonging in different ways, and individuals' sense of belonging may shift across context and over time (Allen et al., 2021; Gray et al., 2022).

In a recent study, Harris-Thomas (2023) looked to the knowledge and experiences of middle school Black girls to learn about school belonging. The participants described belonging as fitting into the environment, being able to be their authentic selves, and having positive relationships (Harris-Thomas, 2023). The Black girls in this study most often looked to their teachers and peers as an indicator of whether they belonged, in addition to the ease with which they could access academic and personal support.

The stories shared by the Black girls in this study also highlighted the importance of curating an intentional learning environment that considers their needs. For example, when asked where in the school the participants felt like they belonged most, the library was frequently named (Harris-Thomas, 2023). Upon visiting the school's library, it was easy to see why this space was a favorite. The library was calm, fairly quiet, and peppered with lamps and string lighting. There was a fireplace scene projected onto the wall and soft, unintrusive music playing in the background. Students were spread across the library among a variety of soft seating and tables where students worked in small groups or pairs. The “calm” and “cozy” atmosphere along with the opportunity to work in a peaceful environment were noted as important factors contributing to this sense of belonging within the library. The library had become a desirable space to learn and do work for this group of Black girls because it was a place where they experienced autonomy, respect, and reprieve from environments where they received less support and experienced less belonging.



Figure 1. Learning about when Black women feel free to consider how friendships for Black girls can support Black girls' psychological well being. Illustration by clinpsych_ind.

As we look to curate homeplaces that nurture the existing magic within Black girls, educators must consider Black girls' need for autonomy, respect, calm, and community. This consideration will require educators to embody these values within their interactions and within the way they structure learning spaces.

Recommendation 3: Value Black girls' social relationships and friendships as a way to foster positive identity development and collective agency

Despite a well-established literature on the importance of peer relationships and social networks during adolescence (e.g., Bowman & Park, 2014), we know less about the intricacies of Black girl's friendships as conduits of emotional and social support (Leath et al., 2022). A crucial part of childhood is having the space, time, and autonomy to build friendships that are fun and affirming (Goodkind et al., 2020; Scott, 2003); furthermore, Black women and girls learn more about who they are through their friendships with others (Leath et al., 2023; Leath et al., 2022)—in both good and bad ways. Thus, when educators value Black girls' friendships in school settings, they are simultaneously supporting their academic development and psychological wellbeing (Goins, 2011), as well as facilitating opportunities for Black girls to make intentional choices about their close relationships (Leath et al., 2021) and, when necessary, practice conflict resolution and repair.

In a recent study, we asked Black college women to describe “when they felt free” and how they learned to reject broader societal narratives and gendered racial expectations that did not align with their self-concept (Leath et al., 2023) (see Figure 1). We found that friendships and sisterhood with other Black women was a core part of how the young women developed an internal sense of authenticity and well-being. Afyia, a 2nd year Eritrean American student, shared:

When I'm with my sisters ... I don't have to think about so many things because everybody has the same foundation. So just the people who are closest to me ... like my best friends ... because I know we're on the same page on so many things and I don't even have to second guess my legitimacy in that space. I don't have to think about that. I don't feel like I'm a Black person before a Muslim person when I'm in those spaces because those don't matter ... but in the best way possible ... if that makes sense?

Afyia's words made perfect sense, and her reflection encourages us to consider—what do we truly know about the intimacy of Black girl friendships? The sting of losing a best friend on the playground after a disagreement, or the spark of hope that a “new” girl might feel when someone invites her to sit with them at lunch? To support the magic of Black girls' friendships, educators should recognize the ways that Black girls show up for one another—the ways that, through their daily social interactions and in learning about each other's lives, they are able to discern how others see them and what is (or is not) expected of Black girls in their schools and in society. Consider incorporating unstructured time within classroom settings that promote healthy relationship building and self-discovery. The love, joy, and challenges associated with friendships during childhood and adolescence allow Black girls to carve out new meanings of who they are.

Conclusion

“You'll always have magic in you, girl. And you've got to share it.”

— Sydney (14 years old)

Educators can play a crucial role in ensuring that the magic of Black girls is celebrated, cultivated, and supported in schools. Since its inception, Black girls have defined and redefined Black Girl Magic to support their learning and developmental needs. Black Girl Magic insists on ensuring Black girls are seen as their true, most powerful selves while also honoring their individuality. Black girls are not monolithic. It is imperative that we inquire about their preferences and how their prior experiences impact how they desire to be supported. Importantly, educators have a responsibility to learn about Black girls' experiences of bias and discrimination and take meaningful action with and for Black girls. Homeplaces that incorporate the essence of Black Girl Magic have the potential to ensure that every Black girl has a safe harbor where her magic can thrive without being stifled, where she can feel like she belongs, and where she has the space, time, and autonomy to build friendships that are affirming and supportive. These spaces have the potential to create ecosystems where Black girls can live “in full abundance” (Ife, 2017).

Note

1. In alignment with Girls for Gender Equity, we use Black girls as an umbrella term to refer to “cis and trans Black girls and gender non-conforming Black youth.”

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Additional resources

1. Workneh, L., & Thompson, C. (2021). *Good night stories for rebel girls: 100 real-life tales of Black Girl Magic*. Rebel Girls.

Educators can use this book to learn more about and highlight the accomplishments of 100 Black girls and women who embody Black Girl Magic. The book tells the stories of Black women who students may not read about in their textbook. Alongside each biography, the book features an illustration created by a Black female or nonbinary illustrator.

2. Morris, M. W. (2022). *Cultivating Joyful Learning Spaces for Black Girls: Insights Into Interrupting School Pushout*. ASCD.

Through conversation with educators and practitioners, Dr. Couvson's (formerly Dr. Morris) latest book discusses how to address the pushout of Black girls in school, primarily through cultivating meaningful relationships with Black girls.

3. Morris, M.W. & Atlas, J. (2019). *Pushout: The criminalization of Black girls in schools*. [Film]. *Women in the Room Productions*.

Through conversations with Black girls and other experts in the field of education, the documentary discusses adultification bias, brings awareness to how schools have harmed Black girls, and profiles schools and organizations that have successfully nurtured the magic of Black girls.

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