

# Black Girls' Book Club

Understanding Black Girls' Academic Identity in Literacy Development



 Centre of  
**Excellence** for  
**Black Student**  
Achievement



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**AUTHOR(S):** Tanitiã Munroe and Desiree Sylvestre.

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Research and Development  
Toronto District School Board  
1 Civic Centre Court, Lower Level  
Etobicoke, ON M9C 2B3

Centre of Excellence for Black Students  
Achievement  
Winston Churchill C.I.  
2239 Lawrence Ave E,  
Scarborough, ON, M1P 2P7

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# Executive Summary

## Introduction

The purpose of the report is to share the findings from an evaluation of the 2021-2022 Black Girls Book Club (BGBC). A co-created space between Black girls to discuss books, share stories, and critically explore topics such as Black girlhood, anti-Black racism and navigating their intersecting identities both in school and community. In addition to being a place to inspire healthy discourse amongst Black girls, the BGBC was designed in 2020 for Black girls in TDSB secondary schools in response to one of the Center of Excellence's mandates to "develop and facilitate culturally responsive and relevant healing practices for groups of students" (Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, 2020). The BGBC was developed as an identity-affirming space to counter misrepresentations, stereotypes and discrimination that Black girls experienced in schools. In 2021-2022, the BGBC was expanded to include Black middle school girls in Grades 6-8.

## Method

In the 2021-2022 evaluation of the BGBC, data were collected through artifacts, student surveys, and teacher observation. Data were analyzed utilizing a grounded theory approach with an intersectional lens. The findings are based on two cohorts of Grades 9 to 12 Black high school girls who participated in the BGBC between 2020 and 2022.

## Findings

The report identifies six key themes to discuss and locate the racial and gendered experiences of Black Canadian girls. These include capacity building for educators;

elevating Black girl voices; developing critical literacy; leadership and mentorship; counterspaces as safe spaces for Black girls; and Black staff representation.

*Capacity Building for Educators:* Black girls of the BGBC co-developed and co-facilitated professional learning for TDSB staff. The “*Show Me*” *Literacy Series* was facilitated by four girls of the BGBC. In this series, staff learned about student perspectives to inform their plans and decisions. During the evaluation, positive feedback was received from teachers regarding the inclusion of student voice in the professional learning.

*Elevating Student Voice:* The findings also highlighted the elevation of student voice. Teachers recognized that student voice enabled students to exercise their agency. There was also an understanding among teachers about the importance of supporting students’ voice to counter their invisibility in the classroom. All students in the BGBC agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped to develop their voice.

*Developing Critical Literacy:* BGBC was a space where girls developed their literacy skills while exploring their identities and made sense of their lives.

*Leadership and Mentorship:* The high school girls in the BGBC mentored and facilitated a book club for middle school students. This included a Black land acknowledgement, the development of a community agreement by way of a consensus and building of trusting relationships among the participants. The findings indicated that 67% of participants in both cohorts agreed or strongly agreed that the program developed their leadership skills. However, a proportion of students in both cohorts were neutral in their response, which indicates a need to promote greater leadership among girls in academia.

*Counterspaces as Safe Spaces for Black Girls:* A high proportion of participants agreed or strongly agreed that their identities and unique background were represented in the BGBC. It was evident from the girls’ reflections the importance of having a space that

was theirs and one that allowed them to be themselves. Nearly all of the participants believed that affinity spaces were important to them. Affinity spaces were important in affirming Black girls' identities and providing a judgement-free space. For most participants, the BGBC helped them to realize the importance of sisterhood.

*Black Staff Representation:* Majority of participants in the BGBC agreed as to the importance of having Black staff co-facilitate the sessions. Most participants agreed that they felt supported by BGBC staff. Similarly, most participants said they felt connected to staff. All participants in both cohorts indicated that they felt a sense of belonging in the program.

## Conclusion

To deliver fair and equitable learning opportunities for Black girls in the TDSB, there is a need to examine and evaluate practices and pedagogies in the classroom and across the Board. More programs such as the BGBC are necessary to promote Black girls' literacy identities and provide them with a space to speak about their experiences. Black girls also need supportive relationships with educators to improve their well-being and academic success. This includes providing the youth with opportunities for leadership and ensuring they have mentorship support. Significantly, Black girls' needs in education will also require culturally relevant and responsive classroom practices in education. As Black Canadian girls endeavour to continually develop the language and agency to resist the dominant narrative about/against Black girlhood, they will continue to seek out spaces that support their identity.

## Introduction

This report explores how the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement at the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) nurtured critical leadership and literacy skills in a Black girls' reading program known as the Black Girls' Book Club (BGBC). The framework of the book club seeks to provide a counterspace of the complex and multiple ways Black girls' gendered identities<sup>1</sup> are embodied in K-12 spaces. The book club provides Black girls in middle and high schools a space for transformative literacy practice, leadership, and mutual empowerment, while building their confidence through literacy experiences. The complexity and multiplicity of Black girls' literacies emerge from their experiences as being Black and gendered in school and their wider communities. According to Muhammad and Haddix (2016), this positioning forces a type of consciousness unique to Black women and girls, owing to being apart and yet with these two groups. To understand Black girls' literacies is to acknowledge the intersectionality of Afrocentric and Black feminist traditions, as scholars have called for the need to centre Black girls in literacy research by speaking to the invisibility of girls in schools, classrooms, and research literature ( Evans-Winters, 2005; George, 2020; Henry, 1998; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Ricks, 2014).

As such, this report points to the intricacies of Black Canadian girlhood, how their literacies in education are deeply complex, and the need to centre their ways of knowing and being (George, 2020; McPherson, 2020). Black Canadian girlhood describes the unique and diverse experiences of Black girls, by way of the social, cultural, and political dynamics that significantly shape the construction of their identities in the Canadian context, and the barriers experienced as a result (McPherson, 2019). Understanding Black Canadian girls' interpretation of their experiences and the factors that contribute

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<sup>1</sup> Black women and girls gendered racial identity (BWGRI) embodies the significance and qualitative meaning attributed to membership within Black and woman social identity groups. Differences in the significance and meaning one ascribes to one's BWGRI may dictate varied conceptualizations of one's identity and perceptions of privilege and oppression. Jones, M. (2016). *Understanding gendered racial identity among Black women using an intersectional approach* (Doctoral dissertation).

to their concerns and challenges further “captures the entire girl rather than compartmentalizing their experiences into several parts” (McPherson, 2019, p. 39).

For many Black girls, schools are toxic, traumatizing places where they receive mixed messages about who and what is valued (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Black girls continue to bear the weight and endure the consequences of intersecting oppressions that require an in-depth understanding of their schooling experiences (McPherson, 2020). To understand Black Canadian girls and their K-12 schooling experiences requires us to move beyond the notion that all the Black Canadian youth who are in crisis are boys. In doing so, school boards will not become complicit in what Crenshaw (2017) calls trickle-down equality, where the level of attention and resources put into Black female students is far less than what is put into their male counterparts. Our current approaches on Black Canadian girls universalize Blackness or are inherently male-focused (George, 2020). These are embedded in assumptions that Black girls' schooling and needs are not as urgent as those of Black boys, and that Black girls can wait.

We move beyond traditional notions of literacy (i.e., the ability to read and write, or the ability to use language—to read, write, listen, and speak) to intentionally frame Black girls' epistemologies as plural and multiple (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) and related to their ways of knowing. This includes practices such as storytelling, signifying, dancing, and singing, to name a few (Price-Dennis et al., 2017; Richardson, 2009). This report takes a multiliteracies' approach, together with the lived experiences of the Black girls who participated in the book club. Through the voices of the Black girls, Centre of Excellence staff, and TDSB teachers, the report discusses the importance of Black-affirming spaces that allow Black girls in middle and high school to “thrive as literate beings” (Price-Dennis et al., 2017, p. 5).

## Setting the Context

Toronto District School Board (TDSB) is Canada's largest and most demographically diverse public education system. According to the 2017 Student Census conducted at TDSB, Black students represented 11% of the overall student population from Junior Kindergarten to Grade 12 (Toronto District School Board, 2018). School belonging is key to the relationship between student motivation and academic success, particularly for Black students and their families. As identified by James and Parekh (2021):

schooling opportunities, allocation of educational resources, teacher assessments, the academic tracks or programs into which students select or are placed, learning incentives, exposure to post-secondary possibilities (such as university), class, gender and racial categorized meanings, high-stakes testing, and of course, grades (a subjective measure)—are all part of the schooling processes that students (and their families) must navigate and negotiate in their pursuit of education (p. 3).

As identified by James and Brown (2021), Black student graduation rates have been growing at one of the fastest rates compared to all other ethno-racial groups in the TDSB. Drawing on the *Elementary and Secondary School Girls Achievement 2021-2022* data, it suggests that 85% of girls identify as Black (TDSB Research Department, 2023). In spring of 2021, 76% of all girls confirmed a post secondary education placement in college and/or university. Nearly 70% of Black confirmed a post-secondary placement in colleges and/or university (TDSB Research Department, 2023). Although the data reflected great improvement for Black girls, it is important when examining their overall experiences in K-12 education, that other factors, particularly their intersecting identities, be considered as well.

Data and literature on challenges and barriers that Black students face in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) reveal a long history of anti-Black racism in Canadian K-12 education (George, 2020). These barriers include the lack of trust between Black



families and teachers and school staff; streaming; the over-surveillance of Black youth; disproportionate rates of school discipline; more athletic support than academic support; and transitioning to post-secondary education (see Bailey et al., 2016; Chadha et al., 2020; Dei, 2008; Dei et al., 1997; F.A.C.E.S. of Peel Collaborative, 2015; George, 2020; James, 2012; James & Turner, 2017; Lund & Carr, 2015; Ontario Alliance of Black School Educators, 2015; Robson et al., 2018).

Often, scholarship about Black Canadian youth in K-12 education has focused on the experiences of Black boys. Yet, “the risks that Black and other girls of color confront rarely receive the full attention of researchers, advocates, policymakers, and funders” (Crenshaw et al., 2015, p. 8). These concerns are further amplified due to the lack of disaggregated educational data, making it difficult to outline and address disparities for specific groups of Black Canadian students, such as Black girls (McPherson, 2020). This lack of awareness of the challenges that Black girls face perpetuates the mischaracterization of their attitudes, abilities, achievements, and overall existence (Carter Andrews et al., 2019; Epstein et al., 2017). The erasure of the racial and gendered experiences of Black Canadian students ignores the possibilities of where and how school boards can respond to the specificities of Black female students’ experiences (George, 2020).

The BGBC’s approach to supporting Black girls is in line with one of the Centre of Excellence’s nine mandates, where community members and families ask staff to “identify, develop and facilitate culturally responsive and relevant healing practices for groups of students” (Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, 2020). Significantly, the creation of Black-affirming spaces like BGBC seeks to develop culturally healthy students by meeting the needs of the whole child: mind, body, and spirit (Ladson-Billings, 1989).

The students who participated in the BGBC had the opportunity to build a sense of community among each other and with the Centre of Excellence staff. This became a key component of the book club. It also gave Black girls a counterspace and outlet

whereby they can construct meanings of themselves and resist misrepresentations.

## Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement

In TDSB, educators and other school staff work to dismantle anti-Black racism across the province. School boards, such as TDSB, have implemented targeted policies and strategies<sup>2</sup> to support the improvement of Black student achievement<sup>3</sup>. To disrupt the status quo and honour the commitment to empower Black students and families, the board partnered with Black community members in the creation of the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement, the first of its kind in North America, to reimagine school environments that: (1) centre Black student voices based on their varying identities and intersectionalities; (2) recognize the community and families as assets; and (3) nurture those strengths to improve Black students' wellbeing and achievement.

Following the TDSB's strategic direction focused on literacy development in *Towards the Excellence of Black Students- Transform Student Learning and Provide Equity of Access to Learning Opportunities for All Students*<sup>4</sup>, the Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement has implemented and created several student programs led by graduation coaches for Black students<sup>5</sup>. This is in response to the student mandates and the recommendations from community consultations<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Toronto District School Board (TDSB)- Multi-Year Strategic Plan, 2018.

[https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/leadership/board\\_room/Multi-Year\\_Strategic\\_Plan.pdf](https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/0/leadership/board_room/Multi-Year_Strategic_Plan.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Supporting Black Student Achievement and Dismantling Anti-Black Racism at the TDSB

<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/Portals/ward8/docs/Shelley%20Laskin/2020%2007%20Supporting%20Black%20Student%20Achievement%20and%20Dismantling%20Anti-Black%20Racism.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Toronto District School Board, Multi-Year Strategic Plan <https://www.tdsb.on.ca/leadership/boardroom/multi-year-strategic-plan>

<sup>5</sup> Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement: Honouring the Voices of Community

<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/portals/0/docs/CEBSA-Compendium-web.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Focussed Conversations with African, Afro-Caribbean, Black Students, Families and Community

<https://www.tdsb.on.ca/research/Research/Research-Reports/Focussed-Conversations-with-African-Afro-Caribbean-Black-Students-Families-and-Community>

Recommendations from education partners including students, families and community partners identified a multi-layered strategy to focus on honouring Black students' experiences, identity, and strengths. The Black Girls' Book Club is one such program that emerged as a response to the community consultations and that focuses on Black girls in Grades 9 to 12 having an identity-affirming space.

## About the Centre of Excellence: Black Girls' Book Club

*When I look back, I am so impressed again with the life-giving power of literature. If I were a young person today, trying to gain a sense of myself in the world, I would do that again by reading, just as I did when I was young.*

—Maya Angelou

In its inception in late 2020, the BGBC was designed for Black girls in secondary schools with the commitment and guidance of the lead Graduation Coach. It was born out of the need to create a space for Black girls to counter misrepresentations, stereotypes and discrimination they often experienced in schools. In response, 15 Black girls used their experiences with the BGBC to define and redefine their selfhood to invoke change in themselves and among each other. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions, in January 2021, BGBC was delivered virtually, with the girls meeting once a week for two hours and its membership grew to 18 high school girls.

In 2022, the BGBC saw the addition of middle school girls in Grades 6-8 taking part in the virtual sessions each week. This latest addition of a book club for middle school girls was initiated and co-facilitated by the girls of BGBC. BGBC was dubbed a space where Black girls can relate to stories about characters that look like them or share similar experiences or cultures. In addition, the girls share their own stories and critically explore topics such as anti-Black racism and the intersectionality of being a Black and gendered girl within the TDSB. For Black students, reconstructing literacy grounded in their cultural orientation, varying identities or lived experiences “has the potential to offer new insights into creating spaces for Black girls' reading and writing within or outside

school” (Muhammad, 2012, p. 4). Hence, the careful and intentional design of the virtual book club had an impact on their self-efficacy, confidence, and overall identities. Their literacy practices were leveraged by the Centre of Excellence staff who connected content to Black girls’ interests and lived experiences so that their engagement in the process was relevant.

## Framework Used in the Black Girls’ Book Club

The decision to focus on critical literacy for Black girls is important for several reasons. Firstly, literacy acts as a gatekeeper to academic success, professional and civic engagement. Secondly, literacy learning is important to the development of the whole child, however, we extend this notion of literacy to also serve as spaces where Black girls specifically can reclaim their identity to define their excellence. Thirdly, we acknowledge the need to define and showcase Black girl excellence, as “their racialized gendered experiences necessitate spaces, places, and an understanding about literacies that foreground and honor their lives” (Price-Dennis et al., 2017, p. 4).

Crucial to the development of the BGBC was the collaboration and co-construction of knowledge that occurred between the girls and the Centre of Excellence staff for the past two years. The girls provided a list of books written by Black women and the decision was made among them, based on literature, that invoked ideas of their own Black identity, culture, beauty, and intelligence, to name a few (see Figure 1). The literary characters had to be linked to themes of (re)claiming the authority of language, using literacy for advocacy, activism for self and the community, and mediating, negotiating, and (re)constructing identity (McHenry, 2002).

Part of the approach meant a commitment to centring the literacy practices of Black girls of the BGBC. As identified in TDSB’s policy (P038) *Transforming Student Learning in Literacy and Mathematics*, literacy is identified as “the ability to use and apply language and images in rich and varied forms to read, write, listen, speak, view, represent, discuss and think critically about ideas” (Toronto District School Board, 2019, p. 2).

Each week, the girls participated in discussions about the book which helped to advance their skills and competencies as readers. For Black girls participating in BGBC, literacy involves not merely obtaining skills nor taking part in a club, but it also has a purposeful significance, and this includes honouring the voices of Black women authors.


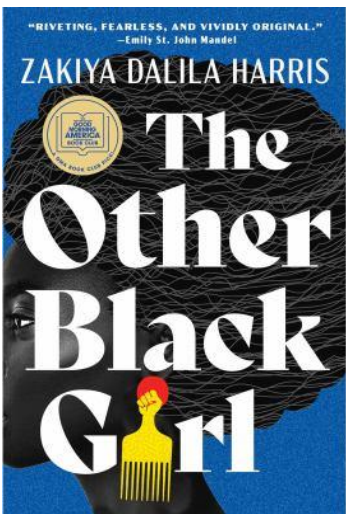
Part of the 2021-2022 design of BGBC saw high school girls building their literacy skills by planning and facilitating literacy sessions with the younger cohort of Black middle school girls. There was a gradual release of responsibility<sup>7</sup> from the graduation coach and Centre of Excellence staff to the high school participants. Staff provided guidance and offered feedback where necessary about the weekly readings and activities. The focus was to support the development of the girls' facilitation skills and to further build their agency, creativity, visibility, and voice.

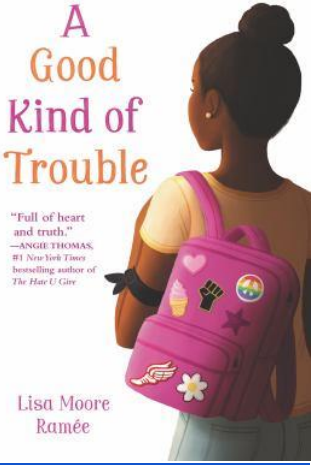
BGBC was intentionally designed to amplify the voices of Black girls and showcase their excellence. Moreover, BGBC gives Black girls open spaces in which to exert and express themselves and their selfhood. They can then “name, define, describe, explore, and transform” (Blake, 1995, p. 166) hegemony that threatens to silence their voices. The following outlines the texts that were read by both the high school and middle school girls of the BGBC.

Figure 1: Texts Read by the High School and Middle School Girls of the BGBC

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<sup>7</sup> Gradual Release of Responsibility refers to when during explicit teaching of new information, strategies, and skills, and while modelling strategies, skills, and behaviours, the teacher provides students with maximum support. As students begin to apply the new learning, the teacher provides guidance and offers feedback as necessary. (TDSB's *Transforming Student Learning in Literacy and Mathematics, 2019*)

 <p>Available in <a href="#">TDSB libraries</a></p>	<p>2021: The first book club high school cohort read the book. <i>Slay</i> a 2019 novel by American author Brittney Morris.</p>
 <p>Available in <a href="#">TDSB libraries</a></p>	<p>2021-2022: High School Cohort 1 read the book, <i>The Other Black Girl</i>, a 2021 novel written by Zakiya Dalila Harris.</p>

 <p>Available in <a href="#">TDSB libraries</a></p>	<p>2021-2022: High School Cohort 2 read <i>Children of Blood and Bone</i> written in 2018 by Nigerian-American author Tomi Adeyemi.</p>
 <p>Available in <a href="#">TDSB libraries</a></p>	<p>2021- 2022: Middle School Cohort read, <i>A Good Kind of Trouble</i>, written in 2019 by Lisa Moore Ramée.</p>

## Review of Literature

### The History of Black Women Creating Literacy Spaces

Black women literary societies have been in existence since the early 1800s (Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021). Literary societies were not just organized “book clubs” where members engaged in the study of literature. These groups, according to McHenry (2002) and Muhammad (2012), also had greater goals of advancing the conditions of

humankind and fighting oppression through their collaborative literacies—of organizing to read, write, and think together toward a better humanity for all.

Within these literary societies, literacy became a tool used to define Black women identities, advocate for their rights to better themselves, and address issues of inequity for the wider society. As they were reading text, they were not only discussing their collective identities as Black women, but also their individual and unique self-identities (Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021). As a result, Black women's engagement in reading, writing, speaking, and thinking were constantly intertwined with, and never isolated from, their pursuits to define their lives.

McHenry (2002) describes literary societies as spaces created to develop such enlightenment. Adhering to the practice created by Black women to develop literacy spaces, there is a continuation of this rich legacy by the establishment of modern-day collaborative book clubs to advance literacy development among young Black girls today.

### **Black Girls and Education**

Not only have Black girls' literacies been misunderstood (Muhammad, 2015), there is also a dearth in the literature that focuses on the invisibility of Black girls in schools and classrooms (Evans, 2019; Kelly, 2020; Linton & McLean, 2017; McPherson, 2020; Muhammad & Haddix, 2016; Sealey-Ruiz, 2016) and a disconnect between Black girls' identities and experiences and the mandated curriculum (Jeffries & Jeffries, 2013). Scholarly activists have called for more research that centres on the deeply rooted and complex literacies of Black girls and their ways of being and knowing (Haddix, 2013). Despite this, literature and reports specifically on Black girls in Ontario schools are limited, and few accounts document educational concerns from the perspective of Black girls in GTA schools (McPherson, 2020). Given their unique position and circumstances, this is an unacceptable oversight (McPherson, 2020).



Ricks (2014) pointed out that the needs of Black girls are often overlooked by teachers, administrators, and policy makers. The author underscored that this oversight has contributed to a lack of educational programming and policies that address the impact of the intersection of racism and sexism on the educational experiences of Black girls, (Ricks, 2014). Though many Black girls manage to successfully complete high school despite the inequalities they experience in K-12 spaces, feelings of exclusion can take an emotional, psychological, and academic toll (Keels et al., 2017).

Significantly, policies and research simply focusing on race or gender continue to ignore the unique positionality in which Black girls live and learn (Keels et al., 2017; McPherson, 2020; Ricks, 2014). Hence, Black girls repeatedly bear the weight and endure the consequences of the intersecting oppressions that shape their lives (McPherson, 2020). An understanding of the complexity of development of Black Canadian girls in K-12 must begin with an acknowledgment of intrapersonal and environmental influences that either promote or hinder their academic achievement.

Discrimination based on gender further complicates school experiences for Black Canadian girls (McPherson, 2020). Stereotyping negates the real identities of Black girls and allows teachers to see them as a singular type of student (McPherson, 2020). Responses to Black girls are influenced by common media portrayals that depict them as loud, aggressive, and uninterested in school (Linton & McLean, 2017). Therefore, Black girls have adopted coping and defense mechanisms to deal with this gendered racism (Ricks, 2014). These methods are often misinterpreted by teachers and school personnel as personality and/or cultural characteristics instead of responses to living with daily microaggressions and other forms of aggression (Linton & McLean, 2017; McPherson, 2020; Ricks, 2014). Failing to explicitly examine intersectionality and its impact on marginalized groups like Black girls, maintains long-standing gaps in education research (McPherson, 2020).

## **Black Girls' Academic Identity**

Black girls often experience pressure for being Black and smart, and they often have to choose between developing a positive racial identity and academic achievement (Ford, 1995). While some research suggests that Black girls are able to survive academically by becoming “raceless” or by denying their racial identities to fit into the dominant culture (Ricks, 2014), other research challenges this theory of “racelessness” to suggest that successful Black girls are carving out spaces and defining their “Blackness” (Marsh, 2013). In other words, conceptions of Blackness are tied to reclaiming a sense of belonging, weaving one’s self into genealogies of resilience, and conjuring new imaginings of existing (Butler, 2018).

Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010) point out, “Girls of African descent are at the bottom of the social totem pole in society; thus, there is an urgent need [.....] to expose, confront and eradicate race, class and gender oppression in our families, communities, and schools” (p. 22). Their feelings of isolation are compounded by misrepresentations and the lack of culturally relevant material used in the classroom. Teachers and educators are called on to create a safe space where Black girls can openly and unapologetically express themselves and need not mask who they are (Muhammad, 2012).

Although well-intentioned, oftentimes, school board initiatives ignore the complexity of systemic and interlocking forces at work in education, which can sometimes lead to a band-aid or one-size-fits-all approach. Band-aid approaches neglect the individual and combined impact of variables such as race, racism, sexism, and gendered racism on educational experiences and outcomes of underrepresented groups (Ricks, 2014). As such, these experiences have also led Black Canadian girls to use this sense-making as a way to counteract the negative experiences they encounter in K-12 education.

## Black Girl Literacies

Within literary societies, literacy development was key to three specific pillars of influence: (1) literary presence, (2) literary pursuits, and (3) literary character (Muhammad, 2012). These historical literacy framings provided structure and support to build and nurture literacy development in some of the earliest historical records (Muhammad, 2012; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). The term literacy is used not only in relation to skill acquisition, but also as a term to describe Black girls' "multifaceted readings of themselves and their worlds" (Price-Dennis et al., 2017, p. 5). Hence, use of the term "Black girl literacies" highlights specific actions taken by Black girls in which they read, write, speak and move (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016) in order to affirm themselves, the world around them, and their own world in acknowledgement of the multidimensional nature of Black girlhood (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016).

An emerging body of research has begun to explore how Black girls develop literacies, identities, and agency through digital and social media platforms (Kelly, 2020). Namely, a study of hip-hop literacies explored how Black adolescent girls understood the meanings portrayed in hip-hop music and videos and how these understandings impacted their perceptions of themselves and their social worlds (Richardson, 2006). Research conducted by McLean (2013) revealed that online communities can serve as a space in which Black (immigrant) girls can exercise agency in (re)defining their social identities and resisting those that have been constructed for them. Sutherland (2005) found that a group of Black girls reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* in a racially heterogeneous class viewed the classroom as a risky space for sharing their perspectives on the text due to their Black female identities.

Muhammad and Haddix (2016) noted that the study of Black girls' literacies is notably "complex" (p. 304). However, it is these very complexities that must be intricately examined to develop justice-oriented teaching practices for Black girls and for young people, more broadly (Kelly, 2020). Sealey-Ruiz (2016) calls for researchers to understand the impact of educational inequality on Black girls and to "create strategies

and actions to interrupt them” (p. 294). Exerting a literary presence for Black girls, means “staking a claim and making oneself visible within the intellectual community through acts of literacy” (Muhammad, 2012. p. 4). In contrast and in response to this societal invisibility, there is an urgent need for teachers, school personnel, and administrators to recognize and attend to the needs of this unique group and engage Black girls through programming and initiatives.

### **Black Girl Magic - Empowering and Problematic in K-12 Education**

Black girl magic, or #Blackgirlmagic, is an empowerment tool assisting Black girls in developing self-esteem and self-identification amidst negative constructions and representations of Black female identity (McPherson, 2020). This term was coined in 2013 by CaShawn Thompson to refer to the seemingly superhuman ability of Black girls to withstand any form of struggle (Halliday & Brown, 2018). According to Jones (2021), the term “Black girl magic” was made for and by Black women as a way of reclaiming the resilience of Black women and girls, individually and collectively. However, amidst efforts to reframe the narratives of Black girls also simultaneously detracts from the continued struggles they encounter in education.

The idea of Blackgirlmagic can also put Black girls at risk of further isolation and marginalization. Through its overuse and limited context, this narrative can easily be misappropriated by both society and Black girls themselves, manifesting in problematic self-readings (McPherson, 2020). Therefore, “educators must be clear that the consequences of isolation, marginalization, and discrimination have created circumstances that Black girls should not have to resolve on their own” (McPherson, 2020, p. 7). It is essential that education systems be held accountable for the well-being of Black girls within K-12 school environments (Porter & Byrd, 2021). Although popular notions suggest that Black girls are resilient and “magical,” they too have a right to be adequately accommodated and represented within the structures and practices of education (McPherson, 2020).

## **Affinity Programs for Black Girls**

Research has shown that affinity programs for Black girls have positive impacts on their development, healing, and resilience (Covington, 2010; Seawell et al., 2012). The extant literature on affinity programs for Black girls and women has indicated these programs are likely to be a source of new relationships and provide access to networks and information that benefits their academic and personal well-being (Seawell et al., 2012). For example, one study found that Black women in U.S. colleges participated in “sister circle” organizations to be in community with other Black women, to seek out role models, and have space where they can be themselves (Croom et al., 2017). Croom et al. (2017) also identified the role of gendered racism that facilitated a need for these kinds of spaces for Black women.

In the K-12 context, Datnow and Cooper (1996) found that both formal and informal affinity programs in a predominantly White independent school facilitated the adjustment of Black students who were often seen and felt as outsiders, as well supported these students' academic achievement and created opportunities for them to affirm their Black racial identities. Affinity spaces or programs have also been referred to as counterspaces because Black students feel that their experiences of racism, isolation, marginalization and their racial identity can be affirmed and validated in contexts where their other Black peers can share and relate to similar experiences and racial affinity (Solórzano et al., 2000). Another study by Covington (2010) revealed that more than 75% of Black females in a bridging program reported increased self-esteem which supported how they navigated their academic and career trajectories. However, there is a considerable dearth of literature that focus on the programmatic supports and initiatives that specifically support Black girls and women (Covington, 2010; Jones, 2016).

## **Counterspaces for Black Girls**

Counterspaces serve to challenge deficit narratives of racialized groups as well as being spaces that create welcoming and validating environments (Solórzano et al., 2000). Counterspaces are not only limited to physical environments, but can also function as either conceptual and ideological spaces. Morton and Smith-Mutegi (2022) discussed disparities in the types of learning experiences that Black girls are afforded and advocated for transformative spaces where their abilities and belongingness are validated. In their argument, they centered the importance of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Britner & Pajares, 2006) and teaching using socially transformative curricula to master content, currency, context, critique, and conduct (Mutegi, 2011). Counterspaces reify the importance and need of establishing a sisterhood and feminist communities (Wade-Jaimes, 2021), particularly in school contexts that are predominantly White.

Black students turn to each other for the much needed support they are seeking (Carter, 2007). This support often comes from establishing a space in any area of their school environment. These counterspaces are established because Black students feel their identity and needs can be affirmed and validated in these contexts where other same-race peers often share similar experiences and racial affinity (Solórzano et al., 2000).

Counterspaces can be formal or informal, academic, or social (Carter, 2007). Firstly, the space, outside of the confines of a structured classroom environment, allows Black students to express concerns and frustrations with one another about their experiences with racism and other forms of discrimination in the school (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998). Secondly, the space allows bonding between Black students who share similar cultural backgrounds and/or experiences. These spaces are referred to as “identity-affirming counterspaces” because they allow Black students to specifically affirm the racial and/or ethnic aspects of their identity (Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998).

These aspects of one's identity are often negatively represented or stereotyped by teachers and peers within the school environment (Carter, 2005; Carter, 2007). Specifically, researchers have found that often in predominantly White learning environments, the classroom domain - a domain where students spend much of their

school time - does very little to foster a positive representation of Blackness or Black identity (Carter, 2005; Carter, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Therefore, the creation of an identity-affirming counterspace is a positive coping strategy for some students as a response to experiencing what they perceive as racism in the school environment.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The data presented here are data collected by artifact collection, student survey responses and teacher observations. The data were analyzed by application of Grounded Theory (GT)<sup>8</sup> techniques. Specifically, in this report we applied grounded theory (GT) from an intersectional lens as an emergent critical social theory and an analytical tool. We were guided by this focus to seek connectedness and fit through analyzing historical and philosophical assumptions of Black girls' experiences in K-12 education based on intersectionality(ies). We acknowledged intersectionality as situated within Black girls' experiences of identity and the multi-layered, influential forces that shape these identities.

The pedagogical methodology utilized by Centre of Excellence staff in the book club underscores the need to support Black girls' identity development in K-12 spaces. The girls had their identity affirmed using an approach based on an ethics of care that was fostered through nurturing engagement with Black women staff and each other in the weekly sessions. These sessions became a space where Black girls not only experienced a transfer of knowledge, but were also nurtured by constant role modelling and reciprocity between the middle school and high school girls, and the Black women staff and the girls. This engagement was part of the sharing of Black girl critical

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<sup>8</sup> Grounded theory (GT) is a research method concerned with the generation of theory, which is 'grounded' in data that has been systematically collected and analyzed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups, known as social processes.

literacies that occurred between Black girls and women within the space of regular BGBC meetings.

Findings highlight the students' beliefs and perspectives about the importance of culturally responsive pedagogy and practice in classrooms and understanding Black girls' identity in education to support their literacy development and leadership skills. The cultural images and narratives that are inherent in the selected books and the literacy learning practices among the Black girls, bring meaning and context to how Black girls construct their identities, their world and learning environment in schools.

## **Findings**

The emphasis on centring Black girls' identity and literacies in the Black Girls' Book Club (BGBC) was further cultivated in developing their leadership skills.

During the book club meetings, the session was anchored by activities, discussion questions, and exercises created and led by the high school girls while they supported each other and facilitated the session with the middle school girls.

The findings are based on two cohorts of Grades 9 to 12 students from the TDSB who participated in the BGBC between 2020 and 2022. A total of 12 students from cohort 1 (*Children of Blood and Bone*) and six students from cohort 2 (*The Other Black Girl*) completed the survey. Findings also included information gathered from educators who participated in a student-led, capacity building series with educators. Five themes were identified:

1. Capacity Building for Educators
2. Elevating Black Girl Voices
3. Developing Critical Literacy
4. Leadership and Mentorship
5. Counterspaces as Safe Spaces For Black Girls
6. Black Staff Representation



The analysis that follows presents data across cohort 1 and cohort 2, collectively.

## 1. Capacity Building for Educators

Black girls' active engagement in multimodal literacy practices<sup>9</sup> among their peers and across the cohorts, reposition them as problem-solvers rather than the source of the problem that is oftentimes attached to their schooling experiences. A major goal of elevating student voice is to support young people in becoming agents of change in partnership with adults. To this end, Centre of Excellence Staff and the English and Literacy Department planned professional learning whereby Black girls could engage authentically as leaders, problem-solvers, and decision-makers. These experiences gave them an understanding and ownership of how educators can learn from student perspectives to inform plans and decisions.

On January 10th, 2021, the girls of the BGBC co-facilitated a co-developed learning opportunity for TDSB staff. The learning opportunity, entitled “Black Girls’ Book Club: Creating Courageous Spaces for Black Sisterhood”, explored the following inquiry questions:

- How can we create spaces for mutual empowerment, confidence and reliance through literacy experiences?
- How does the Black Girls’ Book Club function as a courageous space of transformative literacy practices? and
- How can educators engage in authentic relationships with students, so students’ voices and experiences are heard and supported?

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<sup>9</sup> To develop multiple abilities of students, K-12 teachers tend to utilize both print-based and digital texts to facilitate instructional practices in class. However, there are few syntheses of the existing scholarly work to explore how instructional practices of multimodal literacies can effectively support different lingual and cultural backgrounds of students in K-12 education. (see Multimodal literacies classroom instruction for K-12 students: a review of research- Hodges & Coleman, 2022 ).

Providing a combination of these activities was imperative to the developmental process for Black girls in BGBC. Another poignant moment of this program at the Centre of Excellence is active resistance against the stereotypes in K-12 spaces that have positioned Black girls “as less than or have focused on pathologies rather than the intellectual promise they carry” (Muhammad & Haddix, 2016, p. 3).

Feedback from teachers who attended “*Show Me*” Literacy Series facilitated by four girls of the BGBC (see Figure 2) indicated that one of their key takeaways was the inclusion of student voice in the presentation:

The deep learning that is possible by including student voice within adult professional learning. The set up of this session was impactful for the educators involved. I think that this would be a great addition to our job embedded learning within our school environment. Inspired! (Teacher)

Figure 2: “Show Me” Literacy Series

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# “Show Me” Literacy Series

**Episode 3: Black Girls’ Book Club**  
**Creating Courageous Spaces for Black Sisterhood**

**January 10, 3:45PM - 5:00PM**

**English/Literacy**  
**Centre of Excellence for Black Student Achievement**

Toronto District School Board

1

## 2. Elevating Black Girls’ Voices

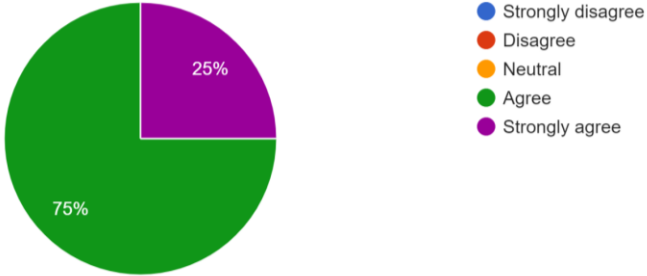
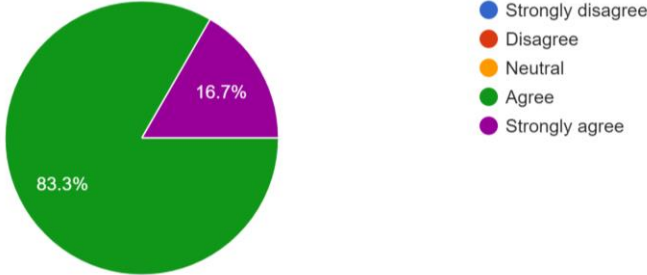
The theme of student voice is integral to the narrative of Black girls' literacy identities. Elevating student voice is a counter positioning of the invisibility of Black girls' (Evans, 2019) experiences, specifically in school spaces that have perpetuated inequities and have greatly impacted the literacy and language practices that are valued (Richardson, 2013).

Teachers' feedback from the *"Show Me" Literacy Series* not only emphasized the presence of student voices, but also the elevation of Black girls' voices in K-12 education. Teachers' comments highlighted the importance of student voice in academic spaces. One teacher noted that their key takeaway was "How important it is for students to use their voice and adults to actively listen and take actions necessary for students to feel a sense of belonging." Another stated: "How important student voice is and, incorporating student interest in literacy and the books and resources you use in the classroom."

Other responses highlighted the power inherent in student voice when Black girls are afforded opportunities to exercise agency: "Student voice is so powerful and I love that this session was led by four students. It goes to show how powerful sharing lived experiences are"; "The impact of student voice. It was extremely powerful to hear the voices and ideas of students. Their recommendations, their thoughts, their feelings, and their knowledge taught me." and "How valuable and enriching the student voice is".

For the students who participated in the BGBC, 100% of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the program helped to develop their voice (see Figure 3).

*Figure 3: Centring Black Girls as Authors of their Own Experiences*

Cohort 1 responses	<p>My participation in the Black Girls Book Club helped me develop my student voice. 12 responses</p>  <p>75%</p> <p>25%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strongly disagree</li> <li>● Disagree</li> <li>● Neutral</li> <li>● Agree</li> <li>● Strongly agree</li> </ul>
Cohort 2 responses	<p>My participation in the Black Girls Book Club helped me develop my student voice. 6 responses</p>  <p>83.3%</p> <p>16.7%</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Strongly disagree</li> <li>● Disagree</li> <li>● Neutral</li> <li>● Agree</li> <li>● Strongly agree</li> </ul>

Student voice is featured as one of the most important facets of how Black girls embody literacy. Student voice is in direct opposition to the invisibility that has shrouded Black girls' existence in K-12 classroom spaces and school environments. However, more important is the students' recognition of their own "agentic identities" (Muhammad, 2012, p. 205), in this case, their voice.

## 2.1 Importance of Locating Black Girls' Identities in Classrooms

The teachers' responses also reflected the intersections of student voice and Black identity. This is relevant, particularly for Black girls, who experience 'double minorities'

status as they attempt to construct their identities, while being confronted with negative images of Black girlhood (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Richardson, 2013). Here, Black student voice is as much a form of resistance against the invisibility of Black girls' experiences in social institutions as it is inclusion. One teacher responded:

We need to counter invisibility in our classrooms by supporting student voice and Sisterhood through the choices of texts we bring in to support learning and ignite joy of learning. I will look up the work of Chinua Achebe and am truly inspired by the student voices heard today!!!! (Teacher, Board wide training, PD)

The responses also touch on the implications of when Black girls are given agency in academia. One teacher commented: "The future looks so bright with these fabulous presenters. Thank you so much for this brilliant presentation that will help so many educators to create safe, brave and open spaces for their Black students."

The educators' responses further illuminated how Black girls negotiate their multiple marginalized identities and how their identities are shaped by their home and school environments. Misguided perceptions and differential treatment of Black girls in the K-12 educational system hinder them from attaining their educational goals and impact positive academic identity formation (George, 2020; McPherson, 2020; Smith-Evans & George, 2014). This is important specifically, as Black girls are called on to rely on their own resilience for social empowerment/inclusion and to improve their own education outcomes (Epstein et al., 2017).

### **3. Developing Critical Literacy**

The BGBC provided a space for Black girls to be recognized as literary experts and as leaders, thereby building their identities as high academic achievers. hooks' (2000) assertions of the sense-making experienced by many Black women [and girls] suggest the relatability that comes from having these shared experiences which creates this very unique worldview. One BGBC participant reflected, "It is not only a book club, but a

sisterhood that is essential to the development and encouragement of diverse literacy in Black girls/students” (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

The design and framework of the BGBC supported Black girls by providing space for their identities and literacies to be valued and honoured beyond their physical existence. One chief purpose of literacy is to understand the self within local and broader contexts to inform actions and behaviors (Muhammad, 2012). Black students being formally organized into literacy spaces creates avenues to improve and advance their literacy development among a group of learners with varying experiences, identities, and literacy abilities.

The BGBC was a space where Black girls could explore their identities while cultivating their different literacies. One student expressed, “Reading such amazing stories about Black girls and their excellency has really uplifted me and made me realize so much more about myself” (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

Identity is constructed through various literacy experiences and practices, including reading and writing (Muhammad, 2012; Tatum, 2008; 2009; Tatum & Muhammad, 2012). As identified in the girls’ participation and development of the presentation in the *“Show Me” Literacy Series* with TDSB teachers, different literacy practices and modalities can assist Black adolescent girls with making sense of their lives in K-12 education. It also has the potential to mediate tensions with selfhood and become an instrument for Black girls to record their experiences for themselves and others. One teacher noted:

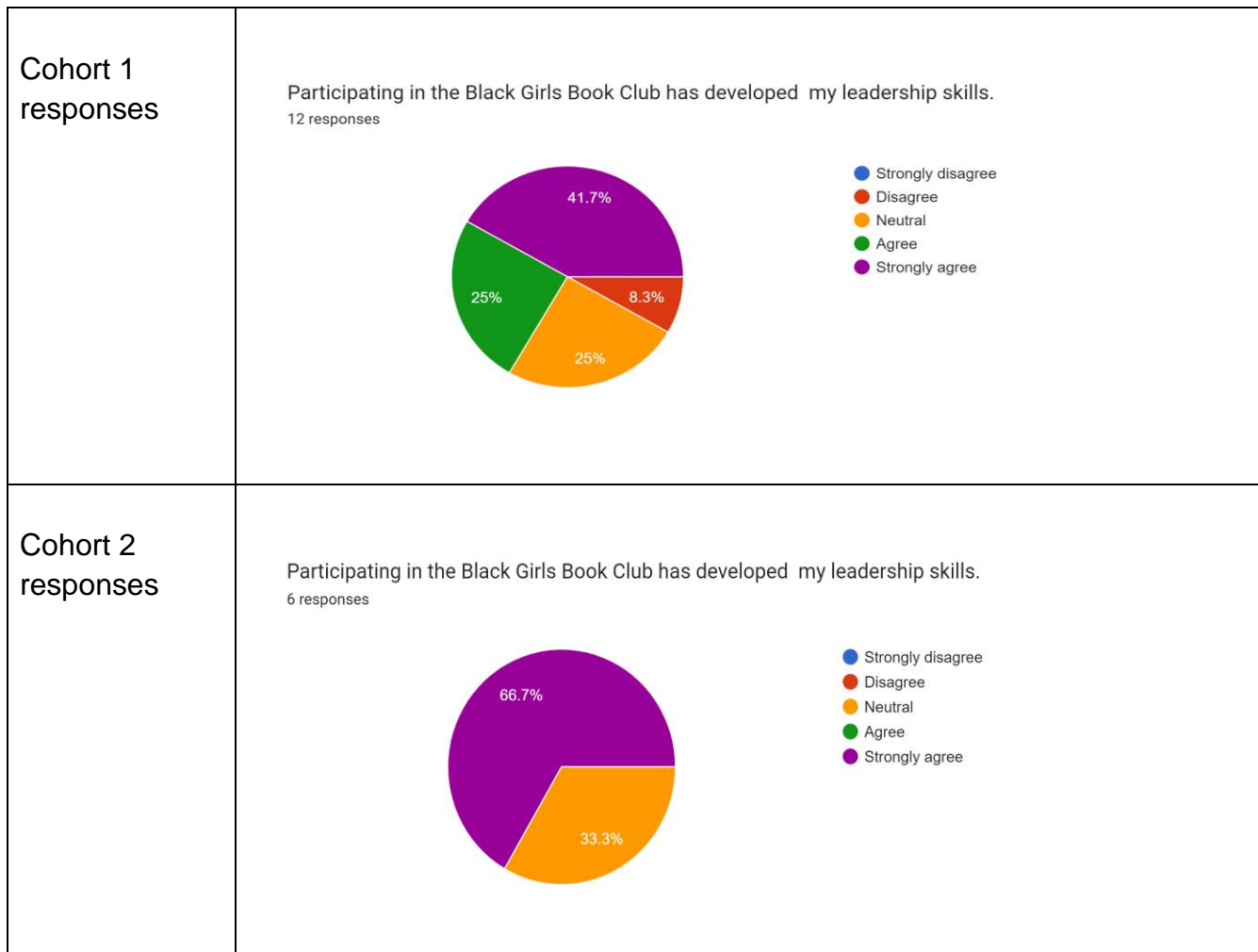
Book clubs are a great way to amplify student voices and create more opportunities within our classrooms and schools. Sometimes educators select the books that they think may benefit students but providing more choices and more opportunities for students to interact with literature and with each other is critical. We must also be intentional about the selection of literature ensuring equity and inclusion is at the forefront of our practices (Teacher, New Teacher Training PD).

#### **4. Leadership and Mentorship Among Black Girls**

##### **4.1 Black Girls as Leaders**

Figure 4 shows how students in either cohort responded in relation to their leadership skills development as a result of participation in the book club. Approximately 67% of Cohort 1 participants or those who read “Children of the Bone” agreed or strongly agreed that they were able to develop leadership skills, whereas, 67% of students in Cohort 2 who read “The Other Black Girl” strongly agreed. One quarter of the respondents in cohort 1 were unable to ascertain whether their participation helped to develop their leadership skills and a slightly larger percentage, approximately one-third (33%) of students in cohort 2, also commented similarly with a “neutral” response. Their responses not only highlight the need for programs that centre Black students, but also the need for programs that promote and encourage leadership for Black girls in academia.

Figure 4: Centring Black girls as Leaders



## 4.2 Black Girls as Mentors

The High School girls wanted to mirror the community they had formed among themselves and the caring environment that was nurtured through their participation in the book club. Supportive and mentoring relationships from the Centre of Excellence staff, fostered positive identity development among the girls in the space. This led to the girls offering their help to mentor and co-facilitate a book club for middle school participants. One participant noted, “Having a space that allows us to relate to each-other allows us to form a stronger connection with others outside of our school and homes” (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1). In each BGBC meeting, four students across

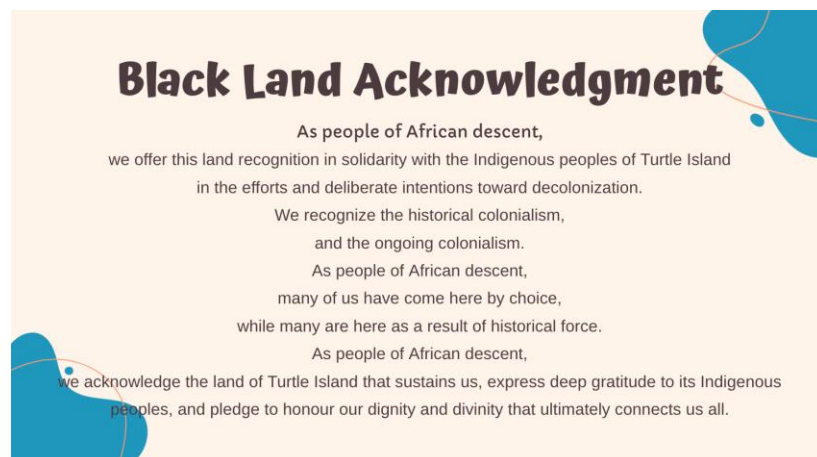


cohort 1 and cohort 2 took turns in leading analysis and discussion with middle school students. The following charts, Figures 5 through 9, provide an overview of each weekly session, with the use of artifacts from the workshop session.

## Land Acknowledgement

Each week, Black girls began their weekly book club discussions with the land acknowledgement (or territorial acknowledgment) that was developed by Kaye Johnson in 2020<sup>10</sup>. It was important for the girls to centre their own interpretation of the land acknowledgment, especially one that positions the recognition of the land from the perspectives of people of African descent. Using this acknowledgement became a powerful learning experience for the Black girls as they learned about the historic and contemporary ways that both Indigenous and African peoples and communities come together - while at the same time sorting through what it all means within the context of living on Indigenous land. This is particularly important, considering the ongoing struggles relating to their identities. These unique experiences still shape the lives of Indigenous and Black peoples today in particular ways (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Black Land Acknowledgment



<sup>10</sup> Land Acknowledgement written by Kaye Johnson <https://upliftblack.org/land-acknowledgement/>

The high school girls started with a slide deck presentation that first announced the agenda. Their agenda included introductions, some community agreements, an ice-breaker activity, and a summary of the book. In keeping with the traditions of building trusting relationships and a community of care, they introduced themselves as new friends to the middle school girls, with their names, grades and the face of their favorite animal character accompanying each name (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: BGBC Slide Deck Introductions



## Community Agreements

The girls in the BGBC continued with community agreements that emphasized being “Kind, Open-minded, Bold; do not be afraid or hold back, Respectful, To be fair” and reminded students that this was a “Brave space, safe space.”

Developing community agreements is a powerful strategy for uniting a group. The process of constructing agreements is often more important than the product. Agreements come from a consensus-driven process to identify what every person in the group needs from each other and commits to each other to feel safe, supported, open

and trusting. As such, they provide a common framework for how the girls in the BGBC aspire to work and be together as they take transformational action (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: BGBC Slide Deck Community Agreements




### 4.3 Building Trusting Relationships

The girls of the BGBC then extended the offer of friendship to the middle schoolers with the slide entitled, “Do we have any new friends?” They were asked to say their name, their school, their grade, and the meanings of their name (see Figure 8). The welcoming environment created among the high school and middle school participants contributed to an inclusive space, where all the girls felt equally valued and heard.


Figure 8: BGBC Slide Deck: “Are We Friends?”

**Do we have any new friends?**

- What's your name?

 What school do you go to?

- What grade are you in?

 • What does your name mean?

Middle school students were then invited to add to the community agreements. They included items such as a “no judging others” written in bold font, followed by “have fun”, “be encouraging”, “be bold to yourself, not what others want you to be” (see Figure 9).

Figure 9: BGBC Slide Deck: Your Turn

**! IT WAS YOUR TURN**

**This is what we went over last session?**

- **No judging others**
  - **H**ave fun
  - **B**e encouraging
- **B**e bold be yourself - not what others what you to be

**Anything to add?**

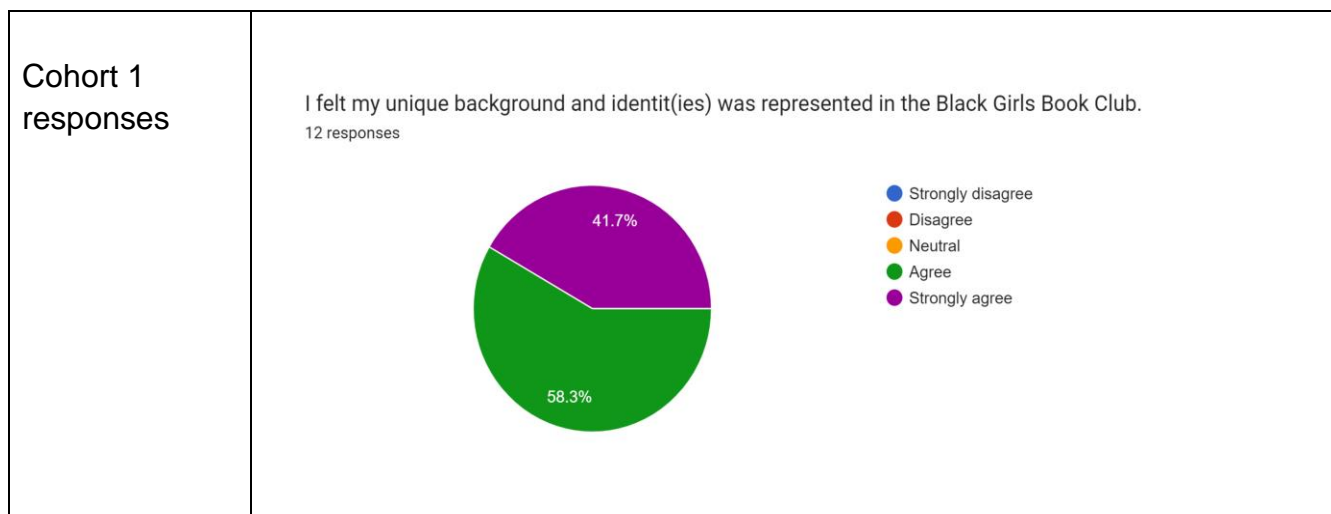
The session was then followed by a video of Lisa Moore Ramee who talks about her inspiration for the book, “A Good Kind of Trouble”, which was then followed by a jamboard activity, which centres the question “What do you think the book is about?” To wrap up the session, they created an interactive Kahoot quiz, entitled “Book Talk Time: Did you Read?!”. The girls ended the session with a display of the BGBC social media handles and a nod to follow them.

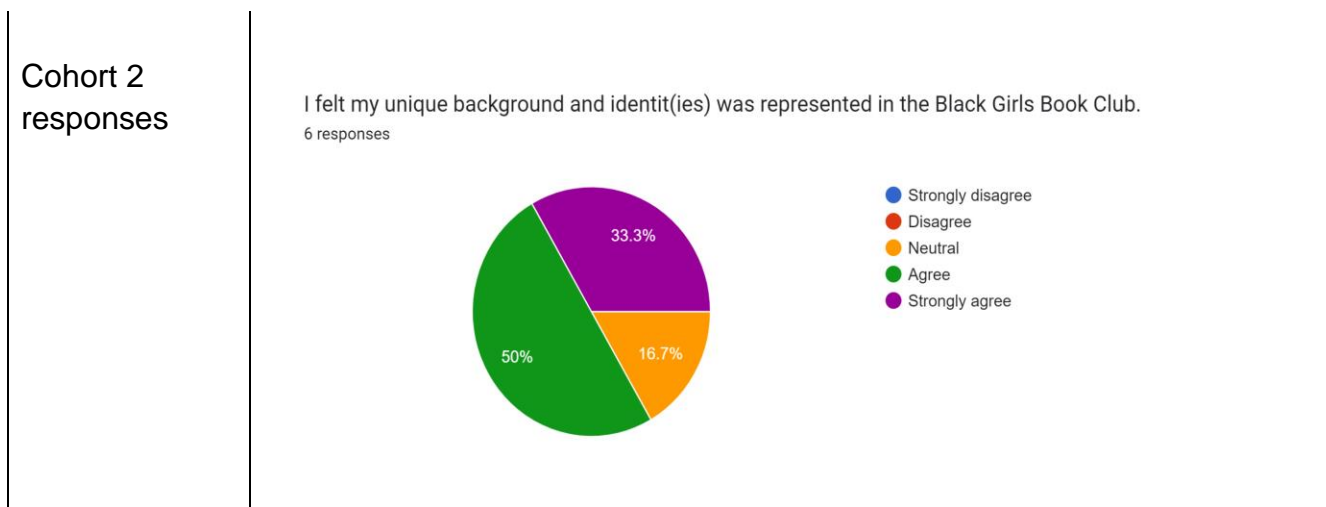
## 5. Counterspaces as Safe Spaces for Black Girls

### 5.1 Identities, Community and Belongingness

Almost 100% of participants from cohort 1 agreed or strongly agreed that their identities and unique background were represented in BGBC. Cohort 2 also shared similar findings, with roughly 83% acknowledging their agreement (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Representation of Unique Background and Identities





Creating spaces when one did not exist has been integral to the narrative of Black girlhood. As Price-Dennis et al. (2017) argued, “Black girls deeply desire collectivism” (p. 4). The notion of having a space that was theirs was also evident in the girl's reflections. One girl wrote,

I think Black girls should have their own space to discuss important topics like being Black, colourism or just becoming Black women in the world going through tough times. Black girls don't really have much of their OWN space and I think having a space is very important (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

Having a space that was theirs was also warranted on the grounds of having the freedom to be themselves. One girl wrote,

Having a Black Girls Book Club gives a space for Black girls to feel heard. I feel like this is one of the key factors that make it so important. Personally, it made me feel like I had a place to turn to where I could be unapologetically myself while sharing amazing stories with other girls who looked like me. Being able to relate to these girls made me feel less alone and encouraged me to follow my passions and creativity (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

Another girl added:

It's important for Black girls to have their own space to relate, celebrate, and have fun together because it brings a sense of community and belongingness. Growing up in a diverse city where there are lots of different races may be a great thing, but it also has its downsides. Each race has their own unique challenges that they face - and may not be able to understand or relate to a challenge that another race may face. This is why having a space for Black girls is important because in that space, we're able to share our thoughts and opinions freely and are able to build connections (BGBC Participant, Cohort 2).

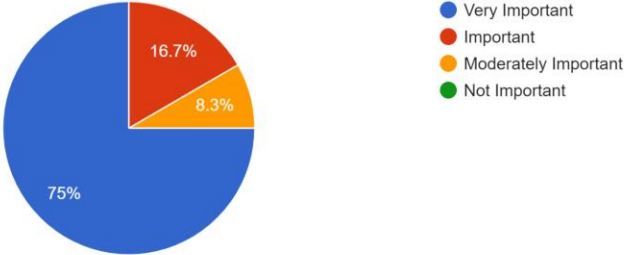
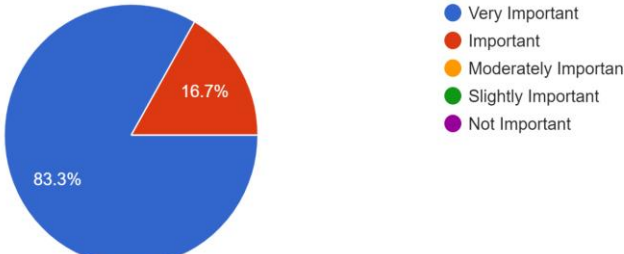
Another girl wrote:

Personally, sometimes I feel lonely knowing that the people around me aren't of the same race because I know they won't be able to relate to the challenges I face as a Black girl. So, I was so excited knowing that the BGBC would bring about an opportunity for me to have a space where I could talk to other Black girls (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

## **5. 2 Affinity Space as a Safe Space**

Figure 11 shows that 100% of students from cohort 1 believed that affinity spaces are important and roughly 92% of cohort 2 also believed these to be important.

Figure 11: Importance of Affinity Spaces

<p>Cohort 1 responses</p>	<p>How important is it for you to have an affinity space for Black girls ? 12 responses</p>  <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>Importance Level</th> <th>Percentage</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>Very Important</td> <td>75%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Important</td> <td>16.7%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Moderately Important</td> <td>8.3%</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Not Important</td> <td>0%</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	Importance Level	Percentage	Very Important	75%	Important	16.7%	Moderately Important	8.3%	Not Important	0%
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Importance Level	Percentage										
Very Important	83.3%										
Important	16.7%										
Not Important	0%										

Another important aspect of BGBC operated as a safe space for Black girls. The BGBC was a space where young Black women came together not only as a space for literacy learning, but also as a space where their collective and individual identities were affirmed and were visible. One girl expressed her feelings of safety in BGBC:

I think it is important for Black girls to have a space to relate and enjoy each other's company because so often we are ignored in our needs and are often not included in things. It's important for us to have a space of our own where we can talk about things in our life (the good and the bad) with people who on some level have experienced and relate to the same things (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).



Another girl wrote:

I feel like it's very important to have this space because it could be difficult to find on your own, especially at school. Having this space allows Black girls to have a place where they can feel comfortable which is detrimental if they don't have anywhere else to turn to (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

BGBC provided a space that was free of judgement and made the girls feel comfortable to make mistakes. One high school participant added, "It provided a very judgment free space with open ears which made me feel more at ease to share my ideas and explore my identity" (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

They created a space where I felt safe and brave enough to convey how I was feeling - as well as start conversations that were meaningful and deep. I enjoyed those conversations we had and liked how they helped guide me to make real-world parallels that draw between the challenges faced in the book and in real life (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

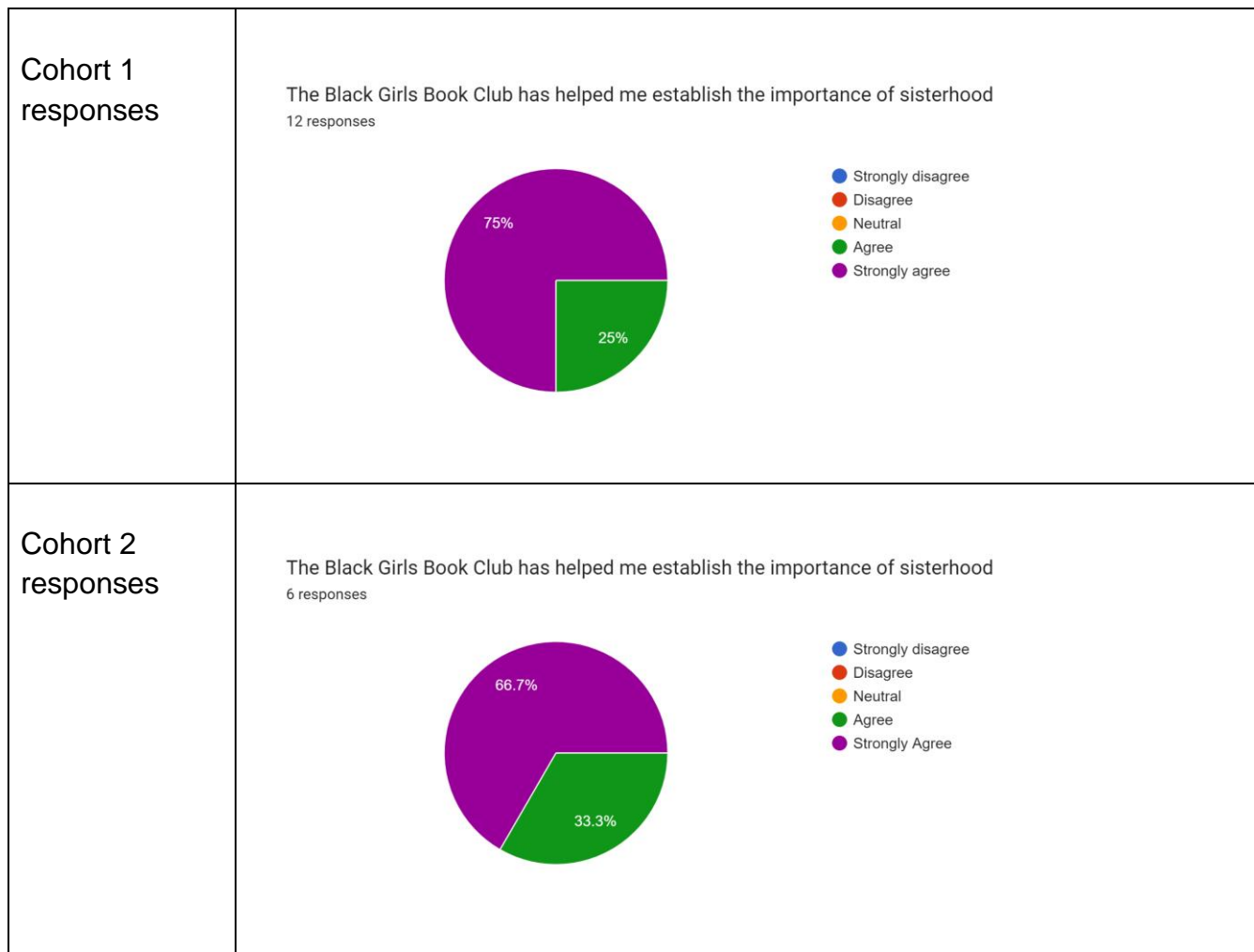
As previously stated, counterspaces emerged across a variety of contexts. These included physical, conceptual, and ideological and served a variety of functions. In the BGBC, a counterspace was used as a safe space in a virtual setting in a conceptual and ideological sense to develop mentoring and peer to peer relationships.

### **5.3 Importance of Sisterhood**

Establishing sisterhood is central to the convening of a counterspace for Black girls. Peer to peer relationships created a system of support where the girls in BGBC were able to negotiate and navigate their belongingness and connectedness to their literacy development. This was done while also making sense of their own positionalities as Black girls. This emerged as a critical consideration in addressing a sense of belonging in literacy spaces.

Figure 12 shows that 100% of participants from cohort 1 agreed or strongly agreed that BGBC helped them to establish and realize the importance of sisterhood. Cohort 2 also reported similar findings.

Figure 12: Importance of Sisterhood

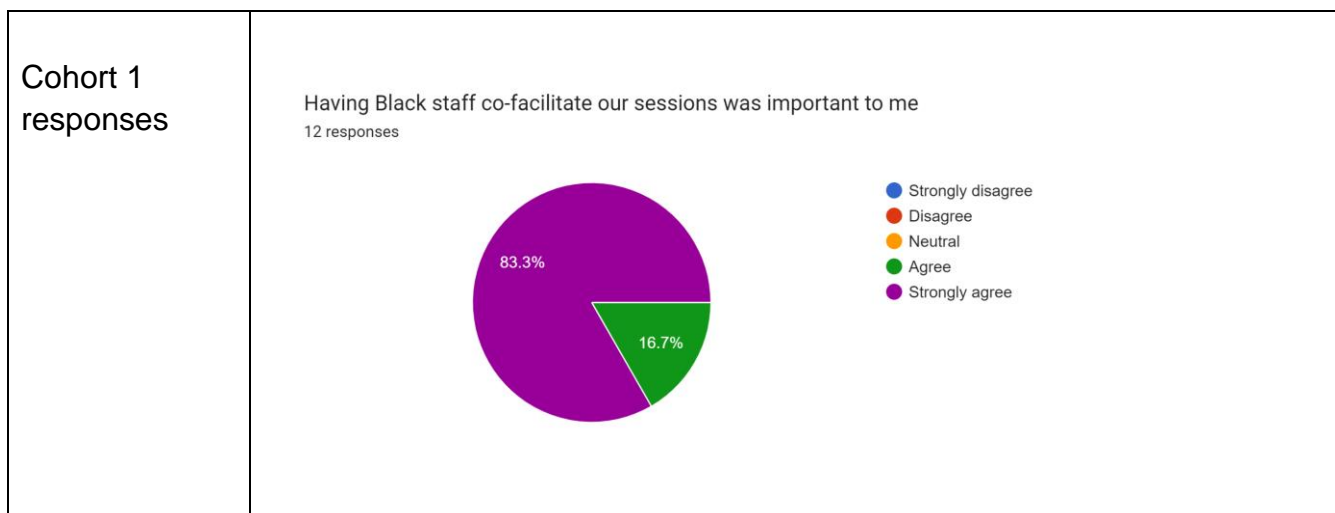


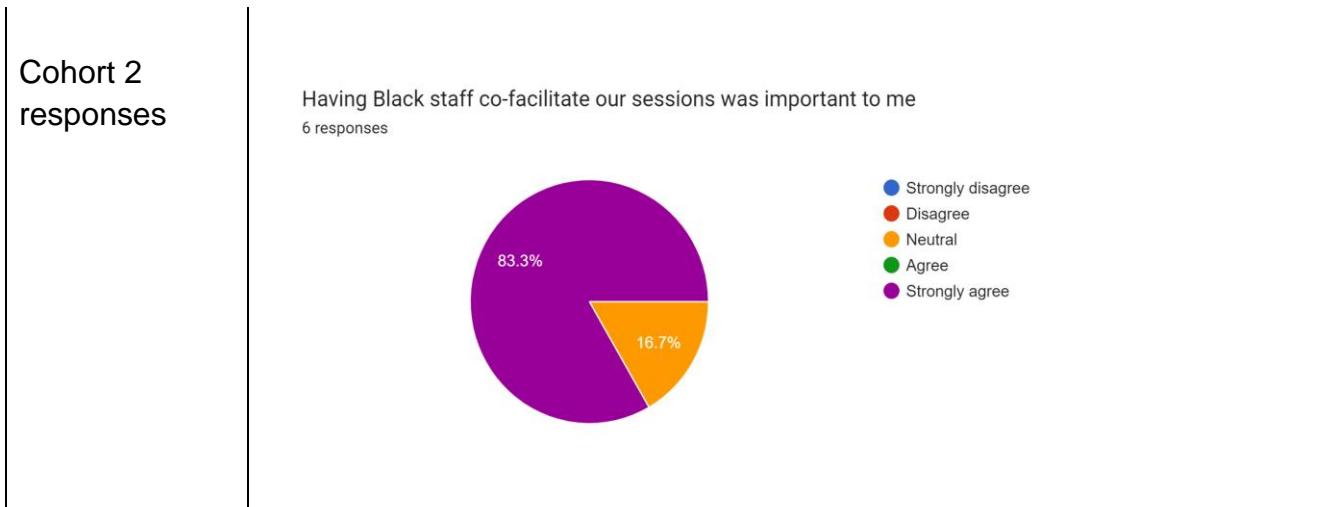
In the BGBC, the Graduation Coach, Keisha Evans, deemed it necessary to create a counterspace specifically for students who shared the same gender and race to address the lack of intentional programming for Black girls at the TDSB. When done with intentionality in mind, these safe spaces can support building healthy relationships, community and belonging, and provide mentorship and a sense of community.

## 6. Black Staff Representation

BGBC as an identity-affirming Black space also extended to having staff who identified as Black to allow for the empowerment, validation and affirmation of Black girls while co-constructing a Black affinity space. Amongst both cohorts, 83.3% of the students strongly agreed that having Black staff as co-facilitators was important. Figure 13 shows that less than a quarter (17%) of the students from cohort 2 indicated that the presence of Black staff did not impact them positively or otherwise.

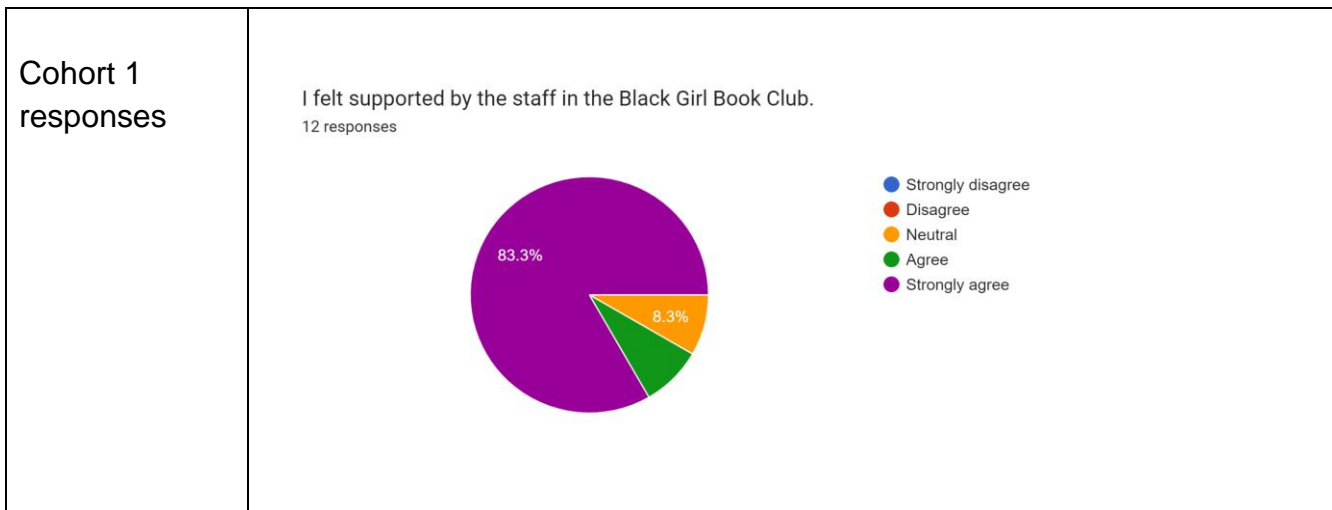
Figure 13: Presence of Black Staff as Co-Facilitators





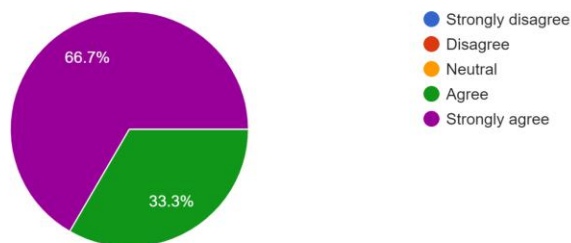
Interestingly, Figure 14 shows that 100% of respondents from cohort 2 agreed that they felt supported by the staff while in cohort 1, approximately 92% agreed with this statement. Only 8.3% of the respondents in cohort 1 identified being neutral in terms of feeling supported by Black staff.

Figure 14: Feeling Supported by Black Staff



*Cohort 2  
responses*

I felt supported by the staff in the Black Girl Book Club.  
6 responses



In response to feeling supported by staff, one student expanded their response and wrote, “You guys were really great at connecting with the students in the club, it didn't feel like a strict teacher-student group but an actual community where we could laugh with each other and have fun” (BGBC participant, Cohort 2). These responses reflect the importance of intentionality behind a community of care when creating programs to support Black girls.

In line with their reflections, survey data also showed support for the relationship between staff and students. Figure 15 shows that 100% of participants from cohort 1 agreed or strongly agreed that they felt connected and the majority of cohort 2 indicated similar sentiments (83.3%). A small percentage of participants in cohort 2 (approximately 17%) indicated that they neither agreed nor disagreed that they felt connected to staff.

Figure 15: Connection to Staff

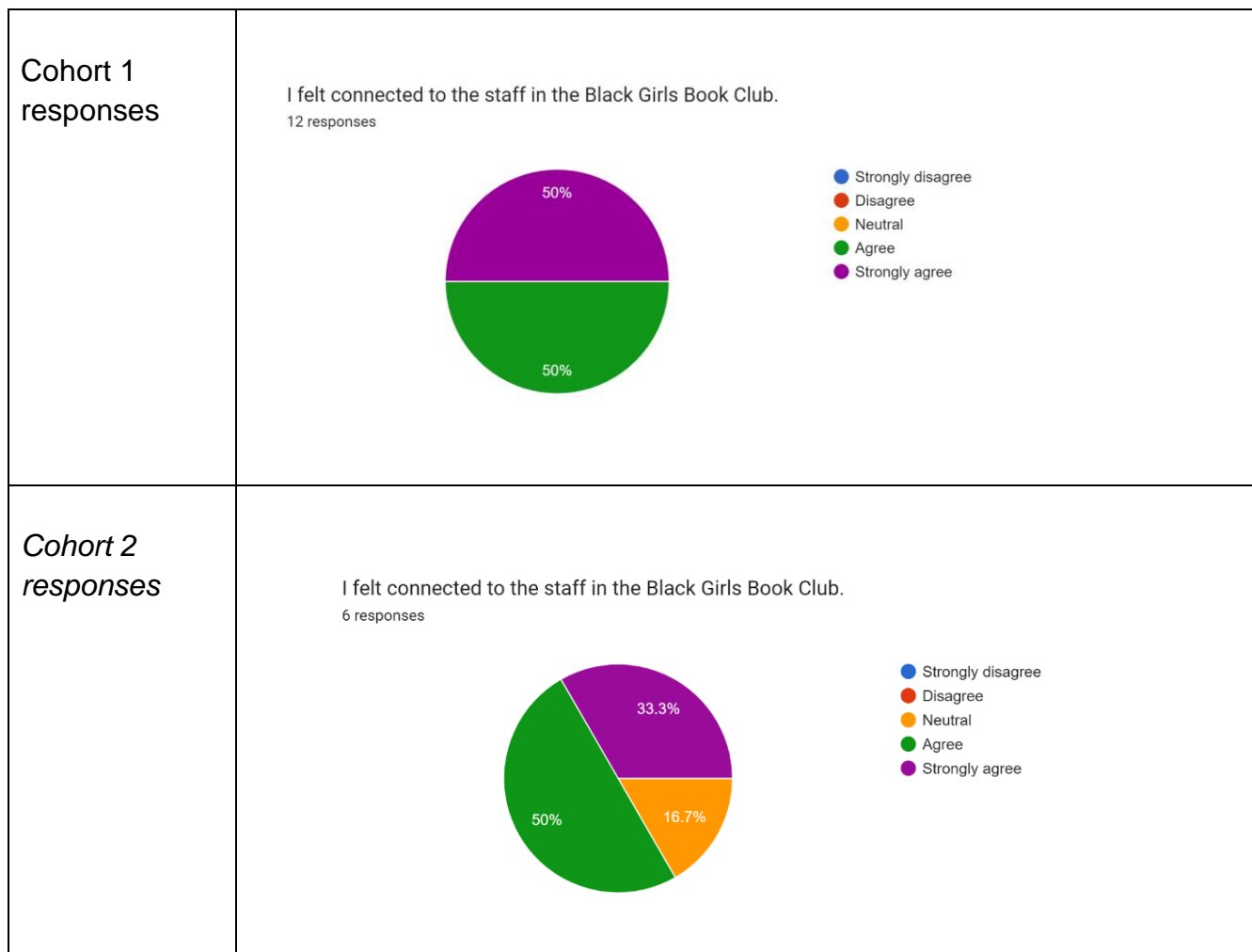
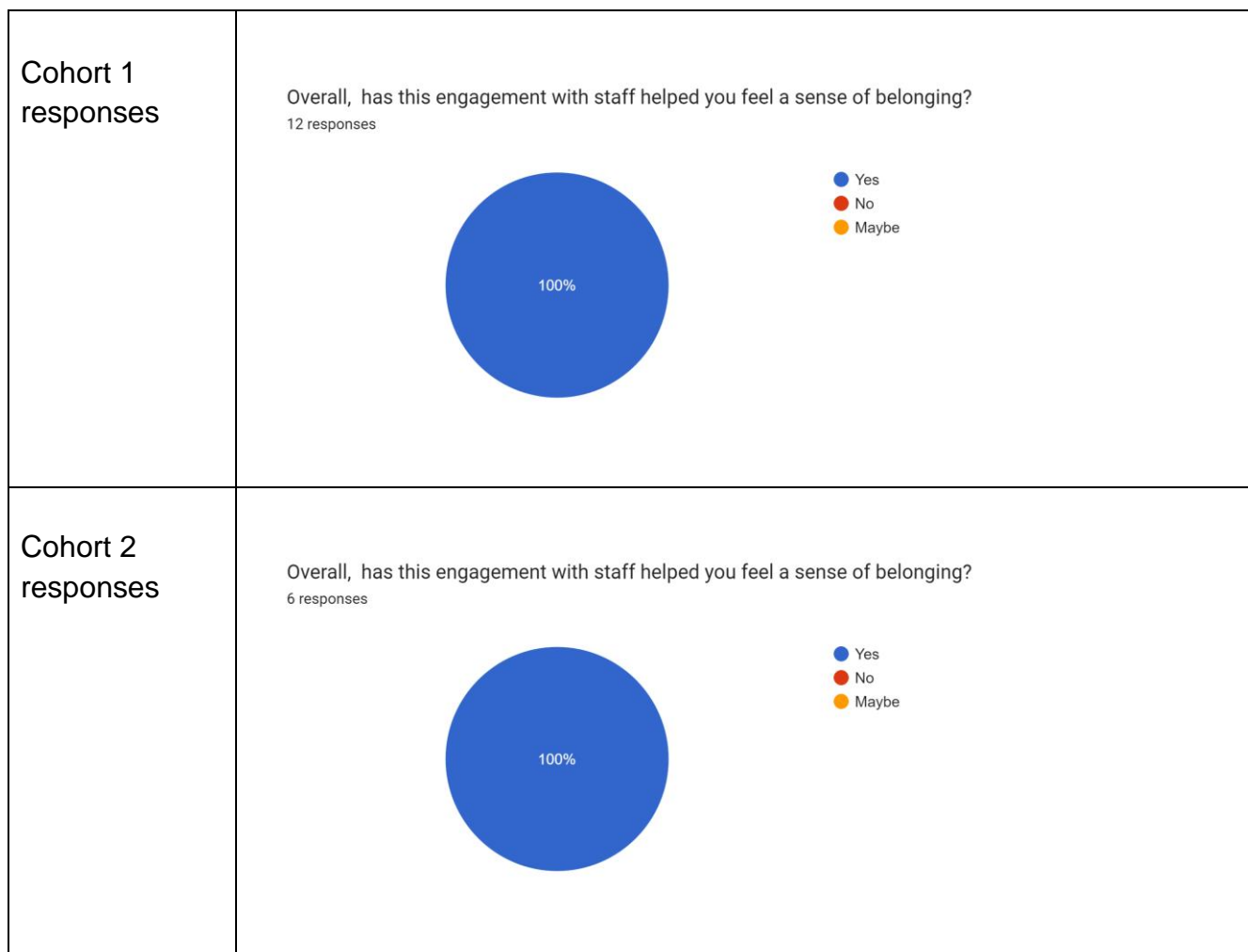


Figure 16 shows that 100% of the participants across both cohorts experienced a sense of belonging. One student responded, “Keep doing what you are doing, because you are aiding Black girls like me who feel like I am wanted and belong here” (BGBC participant, Cohort 2).

The presence of Black co-facilitators helped to promote a sense of connectedness among students. A sense of belonging is a common narrative that foregrounds Black girlhood in their K-12 schooling experience. Not being able to ‘fit in’ has been widely emphasized in the literature on Black girls’ engagement.

Figure 16: Sense of Belonging



## Discussion

This report builds on literature that explores the influence of the school environment on the literacy development of Black Canadian students to consider the ways in which Black girls make sense of literacy practices and development. The focus on Black girls adds to the literature and scholarship on Black Canadian girlhood which indicates that

Black Canadian girls and their literary identities in K-12 education are often misunderstood and incomplete.

The findings add to the literature around Black girl literacies by showing (1) how Black Canadian girls negotiate their literacy identities; (2) how affinity spaces, such as book clubs for Black Canadian girls, specifically contribute to elevating their voices and literacy development; (3) recognizing and understanding the current need for counterspaces for Black Canadian girls; and (4) the need for teachers and educators to cultivate a space to honour Black girls' literary practices. We elaborate on each of these points below and enter the discussion by asking, what does it mean for educators to create conditions in the classroom for the capabilities of Black girls to be promoted, explored and centred? How might Black girls see their identities and literacies represented and affirmed, spaces that enact transformative pedagogies?

### **1. Black Canadian Girls Negotiating Their Literacy Identity**

Critical scholars highlight the need for an explicit focus on Black girls' literacy identities in education because of the incomplete and lack of understanding of how Black girls embody literacy identities (Muhammad, 2015). This means that the unique challenges facing Black girls' literacy identities are left unaddressed, reinforcing and failing to identify the systemic oppression that lies at the root of this underrepresentation. As discussed earlier in this report, Black girls' literacies take on distinct forms and meanings due to the experiences of Black girls in schools and in society. Muhammad and Haddix (2016) assert that Black girls' literacies are multi-dimensional, layered, and nuanced. Traditional notions of literacy are incapable of representing the complex ways in which Black girls read, write, speak, move, and create. While traditional understandings of literacy include the ability to read and interpret print, for Black Canadian girls, literacy also forges the ability to understand the social context and their school environment.



Although no one had explicitly taught these girls how to plan and implement weekly activities, their literacy development occurred both as a result of and in spite of their experiences in school, leading to the creation of resources and materials for the middle school girls' book club each week. The work here highlights how Black girls command literacy identities through their positioning as leaders and mentors in the BGBC. The BGBC provided opportunities for Black girls to co-create, co-facilitate, and deliver presentations to new teachers at TDSB. Recipients of the presentation facilitated by the girls of the BGBC, overwhelmingly highlighted the leadership skills portrayed in the delivery and design of the content. The BGBC framework identifies how Black girls' literacy identities may occur in ways that are not always visible to others and may not align with the existing literacy development framework used in K-12 education. This is crucial to understanding the situated and sometimes limited impact of learning opportunities inside of the classroom.

## **2. Book Clubs as Affinity Spaces for Black Canadian Girls: Elevating their Voices and Literacy Development**

While much extant research on critical literacy development in schools examines how teachers engage their students in critical literacy practices (Kelly, 2020), scant research examines Black girl development of critical literacies in affinity spaces. In this study we found that affinity spaces for Black girls are not only warranted but necessary as they relate to the voice of Black girls. Participation in a Black affinity space created opportunities for Black girls to exercise their agency in the co-construction and co-facilitation of rich and deep knowledge. According to Muhammad and Haddix (2016), Black girls are both generators and producers of knowledge, however, this understanding has been historically silenced by a dominant Eurocentric education.

The BGBC centred Black girls' voices and enabled them to "come to voice" (Henry, 2001). The BGBC was used as a space for self-expression and the girls used literacy to connect to each other and make meaning of texts of other Black authors. Both theory

and research show support for the creation of spaces for girls to use their uncensored voices as it promotes collaboration in ways that may improve self-efficacy and encourage Black girls to celebrate their unique ideas and meanings they draw from text. Richardson (2002) names these as "free spaces" from the oppressions and censorship of voice that traditional schooling promotes.

### **3. Understanding BGBC as a CounterSpace that Supports Black Girls**

From January 2021, Black girls used the BGBC space and texts as vehicles to resist the dominant discourses about their identities, and to claim agency, a sense of sisterhood, and belongingness in K-12 education. Findings from this study reflect that the BGBC is intentionally designed to fully engage Black girls in literacy development that directly connect their interests, lived experiences, and local concerns. The girls developed relationships with their peers and staff. These interrelationships between and among participants, combined with books that focused on aspects of their culture and identity, were structures in place for Black girls to develop critical consciousness.

Having a counterspace for Black Canadian girls is quintessential to the narrative of Black girlhood. BGBC was successful not only in developing a critical consciousness among the Black girls, the strength of the book club was also embodied in the sisterhood and sense of belonging. This sisterhood owed largely to the supportive and safe environment that was nurtured by the Graduation Coaches, Centre of Excellence Staff, and amongst the participants. One girl's reflection demonstrates the prominence and necessity of counterspaces. She wrote, "they created a space where I felt safe and brave enough to convey how I was feeling - as well as start conversations that were meaningful and deep with the other girls. I enjoyed those conversations we had about Black women and girls, and liked how they helped guide me to make real-world parallels that draw between the challenges faced in the book and in real life" (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1).

In their study of Black girls, Datnow and Cooper (1996) posited that formal and informal same-race peer networks in predominantly white school settings not only act as counterspaces for inclusion for Black girls, but also support their academic opportunities and affirm their racial identities. As identified by the participants, BGBC became a space for Black girls to not only to gather and “discuss the issues and experiences unique to them”, but also to find solace and comfort in a community that reflects certain aspects of their own identity. Therefore, at its core, the BGBC operated as a counterspace of support, learning and healthy identity development of the Black girls. As one participant wrote, “There isn't much to say other than that it's essential, especially for the development of young Black girls. It's quite hard being a nerdy Black girl in school, so to have such a space is really helpful” (BGBC participant, cohort 1).

#### **4. Cultivate a Space to Honour Black Girls' Literary Practices in Education**

Cultivating classroom spaces for Black Canadian girls' literacy practice serve as protective forces and allow them to maintain a strong racial sense of self, while maintaining school success. The presence of these spaces also offsets the challenges Black girls encounter that involve effectively navigating classroom, social, and extracurricular domains in the school context in culturally accommodating and identity-affirming ways. To cope with daily experiences with racial hypervisibility and invisibility, primarily in the classroom context, Black girls will develop or seek out counterspaces in the social domain of their school context as a way to self-initiate their own racial spotlighting (Andrews, 2007) in ways that do not denigrate them. It is an essential form of survival that Black girls employ to navigate their schooling experience in order to survive and thrive.

The findings of this study point to the great strength of Black-focused programs that utilize culturally relevant resources to strengthen and support Black girls' identity development in their schooling experiences. According to a participant, “the Black Girls Book Club provides a space to explore your identity through storytelling by having a

diversity of Black voices through literature. Having the ability to read stories from Black girls, from different countries, and their experiences allows me to broaden my opinion on what it means to be a Black girl” (BGBC Participant, Cohort 1). Findings suggest the intentional design of the program facilitated a culturally relevant space where Black girls were positioned as insiders rather than outsiders in a school program. The welcoming environment created among the high school and middle school participants contributed to an inclusive learning environment, where all Black girls felt their voices, identities, and their knowledge and skills were equally valued.

Ladson-Billings (1995) described this approach as “culturally relevant”, which “empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural references to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (p. 18). Culturally responsive teaching can influence literacy development “through the incorporation of culturally recognizable content” (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and are important components of healthy identity development and academic success for Black girls. As Muhammad and Haddix (2016) assert, literacy educators must come with an understanding about a more complete vision of the identities Black girls create for themselves, and the literacies and practices needed to best teach them. It speaks to a need to specifically and explicitly consider Black girls' personal and cultural identities in school settings.

According to Graduation Coach, Keisha Evans, “the reading of text was not only used to discuss their collective identities as Black, young women, but they used the text to discuss and unpack their individual and unique identities” (Keisha Evans, personal communication, 2022). As suggested by Price-Dennis et al. (2017), Black girls’ engagements in literacy, that is, reading, writing, speaking and thinking, are intertwined with, and never isolated from, their efforts to define their lives. The BGBC stood apart from other extra-curricular activities and programming. As identified in literature, Black girls’ literacy practices must be anchored in their culture, identity, and Black girlhood (Muhammad, 2012). The girls of BGBC were not only able to nurture their unique literacy identities, but also nurture their strengths through leadership, mentorship, and literacy development.

## Conclusion

The iteration of the book club for Black girls was designed to counter negative experiences in schools and deficit notions of Black Canadian girls' literacy and intellectualism that often occurs in K-12 education (Ellison et al., 2016; Price-Dennis & Muhammad, 2021). Central to delivering fair and equitable learning opportunities for Black girls at TDSB, there must be a close examination and evaluation of practices and pedagogies both within the classroom setting and across the Board. If these oversights are not addressed, it adds to “the invisibility of Black Canadian girls” (Evans, 2019).

To ensure Black girls' academic success and literacy development, programs and initiatives such as BGBC that address negative experiences present in educational settings will have to be replicated in school communities at TDSB. As such, more programs that focus on the outcomes for Black girls' literacy identities would promote opportunities for Black girls to speak to their experiences and promote intellectual agency but visibility in school settings.

Black girls having supportive relationships with educators to improve their well-being and academic success in classrooms must include developing their leadership skills, and providing mentorship opportunities in the community. To address this, educators and schools should seek ongoing opportunities in Black communities to provide this support. Black youth's most meaningful mentors are often community members and elders. Together, with families, they help to manage Black youth's interpersonal relationships, build connections, acquire essential skills, and navigate the transition to adulthood. These may provide an avenue to disrupt the narrative many Black girls may be internalizing, and instead, “provide them access to the wisdom, experiences, and survival skills of their elders and community members” (Ricks, 2014, p. 7).

Having affirming spaces for Black girls goes beyond supporting academic achievement in classrooms. Educators should promote a sense of well-being by providing a curriculum that is culturally validating. Literacy curricula should include more books

geared towards Black excellence and Black identity, not just for Black students present in the classroom, but also for all students to benefit from learning about Black communities, authors, histories, and scholarship. Further, school spaces need to intentionally promote a safe environment for Black girls to thrive. Especially one that counters hegemonic and dominant narratives and allows Black girls' the freedom to be their authentic selves.

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