

## **We Are Each Other's Business: Black Girl Literacy and Storytelling through Elder Interviews**

**By Tanzania Brown**

Most Sundays, as a young teen, my family and I would surprise one of my aunts with a knock on her door so that my mom and her sister could catch up. Before the real conversation began, my aunt would ask me about school. Without fail, they'd respond to my woes or celebrations with the loving refrain, "*Just like your mom.*"

After whatever situation I ranted about, I always felt justified because it sounded like my mom and I were more similar than I realized. But the truth was, I didn't know much about her teenage life outside of those small moments. Now, I wish I prolonged those conversations and asked for more stories about what she was like when she was younger. Eventually, they would send us away to play while they moved into more complicated, more real conversations.

My cousins and I would peek around the corner to listen. Inevitably, we'd get caught and told to "stay out of grown folks' business."

My mom's voice would echo, "*Children shouldn't know what grown people are saying.*"

My mom and her sisters closely followed the "no kids in grown folks business" rule as a form of protection. They wanted us to maintain our innocence and not feel the pressure of life's harsher realities while they helped each other manage their own. However, that form of protection also created a quiet barrier between us and our parents. As young Black kids in the south, our moms knew the racial challenges we'd face, so their rule was a way to alleviate the pressure and keep us away from some of their own personal problems.

Of course now, what were simply private conversations, my cousins and I interpreted as secretive. We'd convene and share pieces of gossip that we'd collected from overhearing our moms and ask each other questions:

"Do you think your mom was a rebel back in the day, or was she always strict?"

Or, "I heard your mom snuck out once, did she get in trouble like I did?"

What appeared to be nosey kids spying on their moms was actually a deep curiosity about family history and generational similarity. Some aunts would share how much fun they were in high school or their old hobbies, but we clearly yearned for their harder moments - when they felt like they didn't fit in or even when they felt distant from their own parents. These moments—like the short response, "*Just like your mom*"—made me feel like I belonged not just to my family, but to a generation of women.

Now, as an auntie myself, my siblings, cousins and I are ready to maintain and reshape this tradition by telling all the business- maybe even with a bullhorn.

### **Teaching Black Girls: Literacy as Liberation**

In hindsight, one of the many reasons I became an English teacher was so I could always stay in other people's business. My nosiness led me to stories of Black history, young women, and new friendships. These stories from Black authors, women of color, and nonfiction taught me universal lessons of acceptance, resilience and most importantly, forms of freedom. Because of these stories, I didn't want to work at just any school, but rather, they led me to teach storytelling and reading to teenage Black girls in Baltimore City.

For 5 years, I taught at an all Black girls middle school as an English teacher. I had hopes of creating curriculums that reflected "mirrors and windows" into our preteens' lives. I wanted to study utopias by reading fantasy with Black superheroes. I wanted them to read about the food industrial system and study ways that Black, Indigenous people and Immigrants used the land to build their own gardens.

I understood that I also had to teach students the mechanics—fluency, writing skills, and comprehension—but I knew literacy was so much more. I hoped that by reading stories about themselves and other communities, students would develop a sense of belonging and solidarity that could lead to community change.

Nevertheless, I quickly realized that I was not in an educator's utopia. Instead, I was combatting "literacy deficiencies", test gaps, and a lack of culturally responsive texts and materials. The assessments produced low academic scores because many education systems define expertise through white-centered curricula or digital assessments and algorithms. Less than 40% of texts feature characters from racially minoritized groups (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development [ASCD], n.d.). These scores and curricula fail to acknowledge Black girls' deep lived background knowledge, a key component of strong literacy.

Although my school's curriculum made efforts to explore international stories of color, it still did not reflect local stories or relevant histories that would allow students to use their own background knowledge as expertise. An Illinois library association report finds "African American students who read culturally relevant texts showed an approximately 15% increase in reading comprehension and greater enjoyment of reading (International Literacy Association [ILA], 2020). Even though we understood the importance of not only representation, but also complex and three dimensional characters, the larger systems- curriculums and the assessments- still centered white male experiences and voices which negatively impacted test and reading scores.

My 8th grade classes—girls between 13 and 15—were the most disconnected from reading and writing assignments. Eighth grade was also the year they experienced the most fear, anxiety, and excitement about their futures. Firstly, many of them started to go through puberty which came with a set of body changes they wanted to talk about, but, most importantly, it was the time that they began to try on different versions of who they are. They needed a curriculum that spoke to their coming of age insecurities and expectations, and demonstrated different role models and lifestyles. Each year, I kept a coming of age section in my classroom library for students to begin finding answers to some of their teenage questions.

Luckily, young adult authors like Jacqueline Woodson, Tomi Adeyemi, and Elizabeth Acevedo provided us with novels that gave them a sense of belonging, showed them imaginative worlds and shared new varieties of freedom. In 2024, the Cooperative Children's Book Center reported that for the first time, 51% of analyzed children's books featured significant BIPOC content (CCBC, 2024). Additionally, I constantly encouraged them to look back in the past and lean on the older women around them for advice and support, including their teachers, to help shape their futures.

### **The Innovation: A Curriculum of Survival and Centering Black Women Stories**

In spite of my best efforts, near the end of the year, 58% of my students still reported not liking reading or learning about history. Many explained that they could never find a book that was interesting to them or that they wanted to finish entirely. They described reading as boring, hard work and unrelatable. Although books with Black girls and other characters of color are growing, the CCBC reminds us “White characters, animals, and inanimate objects still make up a large portion of children's literature main characters, even as their share decreases.

I knew that if the curriculum was not going to change, we would have to adapt it to meet the needs of our students. The 8th grade team and I had to select new themes and lean on the experts in our communities to re-engage and reignite our Black girls' passion for learning and connection to community before high school started.

For their last cumulative project, the 8th grade team wanted to reshape the module into an interdisciplinary project about: survival, identity and resilience. In Science, they'd study genetics and the likelihood of specific traits and mutations while reading “Farewell to Manzanar: A memoir about Japanese internment”.

### **Our central questions were: What are the qualities, characteristics, and resistance factors of a survivor?**

At the time, 3 out of the 4 of us on the 8th grade team had their own or a relative's experience with cancer, especially breast cancer, and we were aware about the breast cancer disparities between Black women and girls.

For this project, we wanted to introduce our students to our collective networks and communities around cancer, even though it was not an issue that directly impacted them yet as young black girls. Since the project centered on survival, we decided to have our students interview Black breast cancer survivors. We reached out to community members- teachers, health educators, and family members of 5-7 young girls to be interviewed and asked personal questions about their health and battle with breast cancer. They explored breast cancer through a scientific and genetic lens, but they also listened for “resistance factors.” In my ELA class, we defined resistance factors as actions, items, and communities that helped and contributed positively physically, emotionally, or mentally to the survivor during their challenge. Throughout the semester, they collected kinds of resistance factors as we read the memoir and spoke to scientific experts. The final project was twofold: an oral presentation explaining the survivor’s cancer, treatment types, and outcomes, and an argumentative essay identifying the three strongest resistance factors using evidence.

As a clear example of the importance of local and relevant curriculum, we were able to get 6 survivors willing to share their stories and be celebrated with presentations; students also had the option to interview breast cancer survivors in their own families. Students spoke with their survivors at least three times over the trimester, for a minimum of one hour per interview, discussing things like body changes, complexity of surgery, radiation and chemotherapy, ways they remained calm when they were feeling scared, as well as communities they relied on.

In these interviews, students practiced research, note-taking, summarizing, and reflection through real conversations. Many survivors described reading, storytelling, or journaling as powerful resistance factors, alongside dancing, knitting, praying, and participation in support groups. After the interviews, my students returned to class completely re-engaged.

“Ms. Brown- she said she started going to therapy and a support group to help her get through it.”

“My survivor joined the choir after her surgery - she was using her voice again.”

“My survivor who had breast cancer 3x taught me to always be myself and never stop doing the things I loved.”

“I never knew my grandma had breast cancer when my mom was my age. I finally talked to my mom about it.”

The students started to reconnect with reading and learning about history, but also they started to see the importance of talking to elders or “grown folks” to help them shape their futures. They learned that most Black breast cancer survivors detect their own mass before a doctor does. Many survivors emphasized the importance of knowing and tracking changes in one’s body as a critical resistance factor. My students left feeling proud and unashamed of

discussing body changes and body exploration. They also connected that literacy and the study of history can be rooted in community, rather than far away locations and eras. Teachers, survivors, and community members came together not only to share their stories with a younger generation, but also to show students that education can be useful and beneficial to the community.

Due to the excitement and engagement of the survival unit, our school administration elevated breast cancer awareness celebrations to a “Breast Cancer Walk” where students and other community members created posters, flyers, and wore pink to celebrate survivors while they shared stories. After this unit, students' likelihood to read at home increased. Many of our students were able to read the entirety of the Farewell to Manzanar book, complete oral presentations without stuttering, and explain how cancer cells spread in the body. Students received some of the highest grades for argumentative writing and reading comprehension in comparison to the 8th graders who did not do this project. Vocabulary, comprehension, and synthesis grew through authentic engagement. But more importantly, they learned that knowledge doesn't only live in books—it lives in the people in the communities, often the ones overlooked in their common curricula.

My students saw themselves reflected in the stories they collected. They practiced critical literacy—reading the world and acting upon it. They continued their knowledge-sharing by creating a survival guide for incoming sixth graders; sharing some of the resistance factors they learned. Just as they interviewed their elders, they now became community historians and healers of making middle school a little easier for other Black girls.

### **Closing Reflections and Guidance for Practitioners**

This project was innovative not because it used new technology, but because it redefined expertise by centering Black women, elders, and lived experience as legitimate texts. As educators, we were able to finally achieve critical literacy through mirrors and windows- we showed Black girls an important aspect Black women's health and closed the intergenerational loop of sharing stories. Below I've shared a quick guide of how other educators and practitioners can honor this culminating project:

**Literacy Objective:** Students will build oral language, listening, and narrative writing skills by conducting interviews with Black women breast cancer survivors and community experts.

**Science Objective:** Students will investigate the genetic and biological foundations of breast cancer, including inheritance patterns, genetic mutations (such as BRCA1 and BRCA2), and environmental factors that influence disease risk.

- Begin with a human-centered theme (Survival, Healing, Justice).
- Choose texts that invite empathy and connection.
- Identify community partners, elders, or experts of color.
- Teach interview techniques, critical inquiry, and reflective writing.
- Culminate in an act of collective creation or service.

In a liberated world, education would meet students in their communities to show them that there is so much to learn through the history and experiences of our elders. The argument for elder-based curricula does not ignore decoding skills. This project recognizes that they are just as important for the present day as they were to our ancestors. However, literacy can always be about knowledge building and relearning culture—using stories to understand ourselves, cultural repair, and combat new problems within our communities.

While this was only one unit within a year, this project was its own resistant factor. A way that teachers and students would positively contribute to the lack of quality multi-dimensional coming of age stories for Black girls. In some ways it helps all of our elders let go of the old rule: “no kids in grown folks business” and now for our students, they can see storytelling as one of the ultimate forms of protection and empowerment. In reimagining literacy as intergenerational, communal, and action-oriented, we allow Black girls to claim stories that were once kept from them. Now, as an auntie myself, my siblings, cousins, and I are ready to maintain and reshape this tradition by telling all the business—maybe even with a bullhorn.

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