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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 findings of the *Black Girls Book Club: A Guide to Developing and Facilitating Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Spaces* (Black Girls Book Club, 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 school year, the BGBC was implemented in 12 schools across the district. The study was conducted using a qualitative approach, with data collected through focus groups and individual interviews with Black girls. The data was analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes and experiences. The findings of the study are presented in the following sections.

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 [redacted] 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 [redacted] 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 [redacted]

theirs and one that allowed them to be themselves. Nearly all of the participants agreed that affinity spaces were important to them. Affinity spaces were important in providing a safe and free space. For most participants, the BGBC helped them to realize the importance of sisterhood.

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 district. Black girls need to be seen and heard as individuals with unique 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

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 Book Club (BGBC). The framework of the book club seeks to provide a counterspace of the complex and multiple ways Black girls' gendered identities¹ 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 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 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

¹ Black women and girls gendered racial identity (BWGRI) embodies the significance and qualitative meaning attributed to the intersection of race and gender. Jones, M. (2016). *Understanding gendered racial identity among Black women using an intersectional approach* (Doctoral dissertation).

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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

Setting the Context

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

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 strategies²

Recommendations from education partners including students, families and community partners identified a multi-experiences, identity, and strengths. A space 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

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

•&@ [|+@ 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 & } c } of Á|æ& Á ã|•q& c| ^••Á& aÁã^aÁc] ^|ã} &•Á [Á@æÁ@ãÁ} * æ^ { ^} of Á@Á process was relevant.

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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 æ& } [, |ã^ ^Á@Á ^ãÁ& Á^ã ^Á& aÁ @, &æ ^Á|æ& Á ã|Ác&||^} & Éæ Á@ãÁæ racialized gendered experiences necessitate spaces, places, and an understanding about |ã^ æ& Á@æÁ | ^* | [^} aÁ& aÁq} [| Á@ãÁã^•Á (Price-Dennis et al., 2017, p. 4).

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 responsibility⁷

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

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). This invisibility is often a result of the way 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

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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 in a white culture (Ricks, 2014) that successful Black girls are carving out space for themselves (Butler, 2013). In other words, conceptions of Blackness are tied to reclaiming a sense of self and imaginings of existing (Butler, 2018).

Evans-Winter (2012) 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. 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


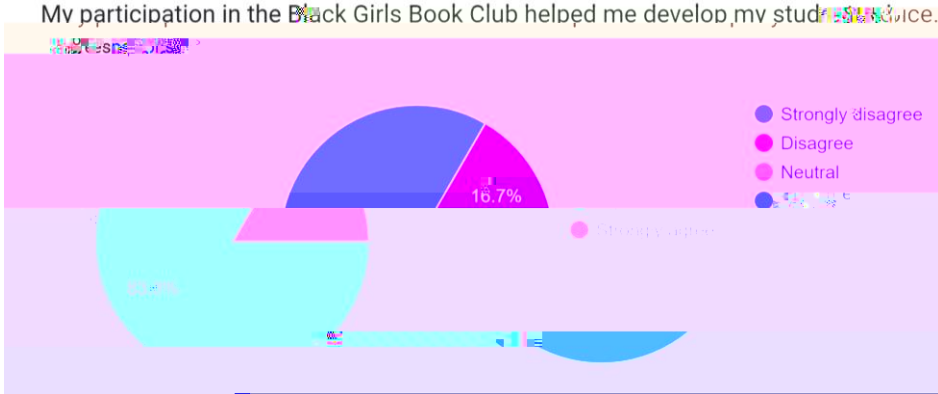
school time - does very little to foster a positive representation of Blackness or Black identity (Carter, 2005; Carter, 2007; Solórzano et al., 2000). Therefore, the creation of an identity-affirming counterspace is a positive coping strategy for some students as a response to experiencing what they 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)⁸ 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 K-12 education based on intersectionality(ies). We acknowledged intersectionality as situated, 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

⁸ Grounded theory (GT) is a research methodology in which data are systematically collected and analyzed. It is used to uncover such things as social relationships and behaviours of groups, known as social processes.

<p>Cohort 1 responses</p>	
<p>Cohort 2 responses</p>	

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 (Harris, 2012, p. 205), in this case, their voice.

2.1

studied the intersections of student voice and Black girls' literacy practices. The study explored the ways in which Black girls' literacy practices are shaped by their experiences in school and community spaces. The study found that Black girls' literacy practices are often shaped by their experiences of racism and sexism in school and community spaces. The study also found that Black girls' literacy practices are often shaped by their experiences of being invisible in school and community spaces. The study suggests that Black girls' literacy practices are a form of resistance to the invisibility that has shrouded their existence in K-12 classroom spaces and school environments.

status as they attempt to construct their identities, while being confronted with negative images of Black girlhood (Muhammad & McArthur, 2015; Richardson, 2013). Here,

experiences in social institutions as it is inclusion. One teacher responded:

We need to counter invisibil

sisterhood that is essential to the development and encouragement of diverse literacy in

Cohort 1 responses	
Cohort 2 responses	

4.2 Black Girls as Mentors

The High School girls wanted to mirror the community

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.

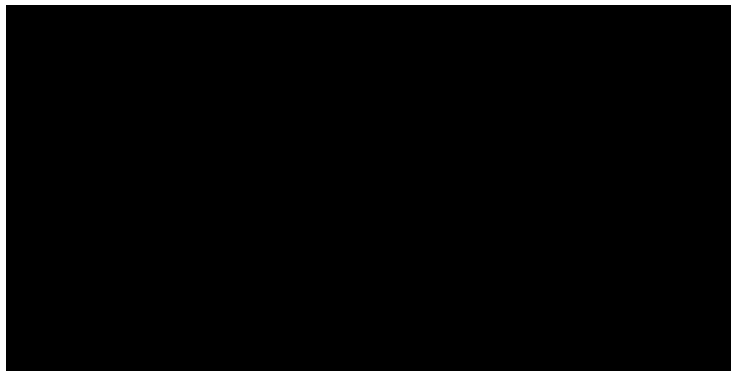
Land Acknowledgement

Each week, Black girls began their weekly book club discussions with the land acknowledgement (or territorial acknowledgment) that was developed by Kaye Johnson in 2020¹⁰. 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

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).

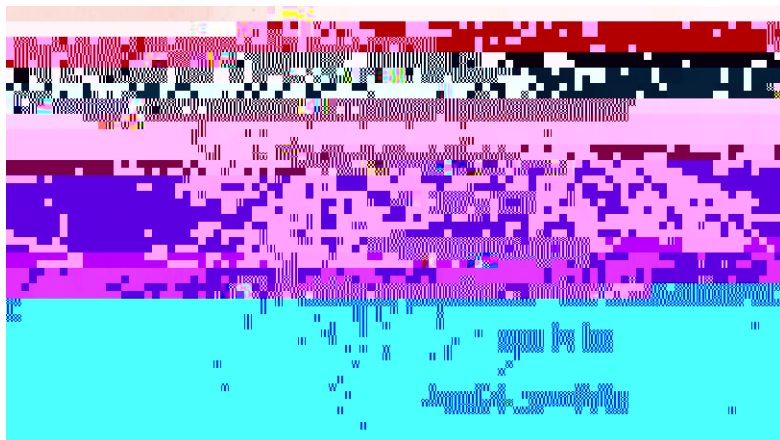
Figure 6: BGBC Slide Deck Introductions

Community Agreements



Middle school students were then invited to add to the community agreements. They

Figure 9: BGBC Slide Deck: Your Turn



The session was then followed by a video of Lisa Moore Ramee who talks about her
ion with a display of the BGBC social media handles and a nod to follow them.

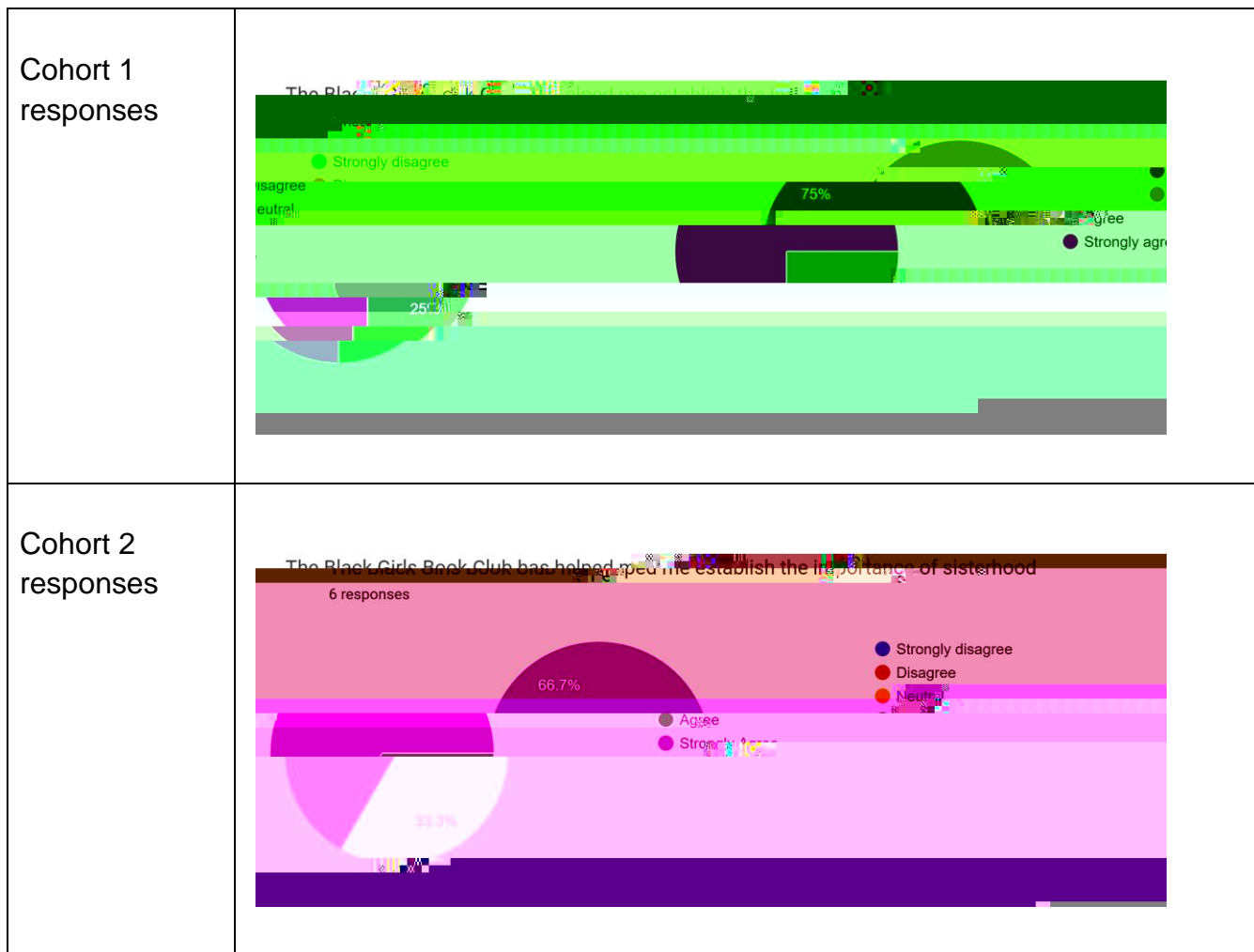
Cohort 2
responses

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

Cohort 1
responses

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

Cohort 1
responses

Cohort 2 responses	
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Interestingly, Figure 14 shows that 100% of respondents from cohort 2 agreed that they

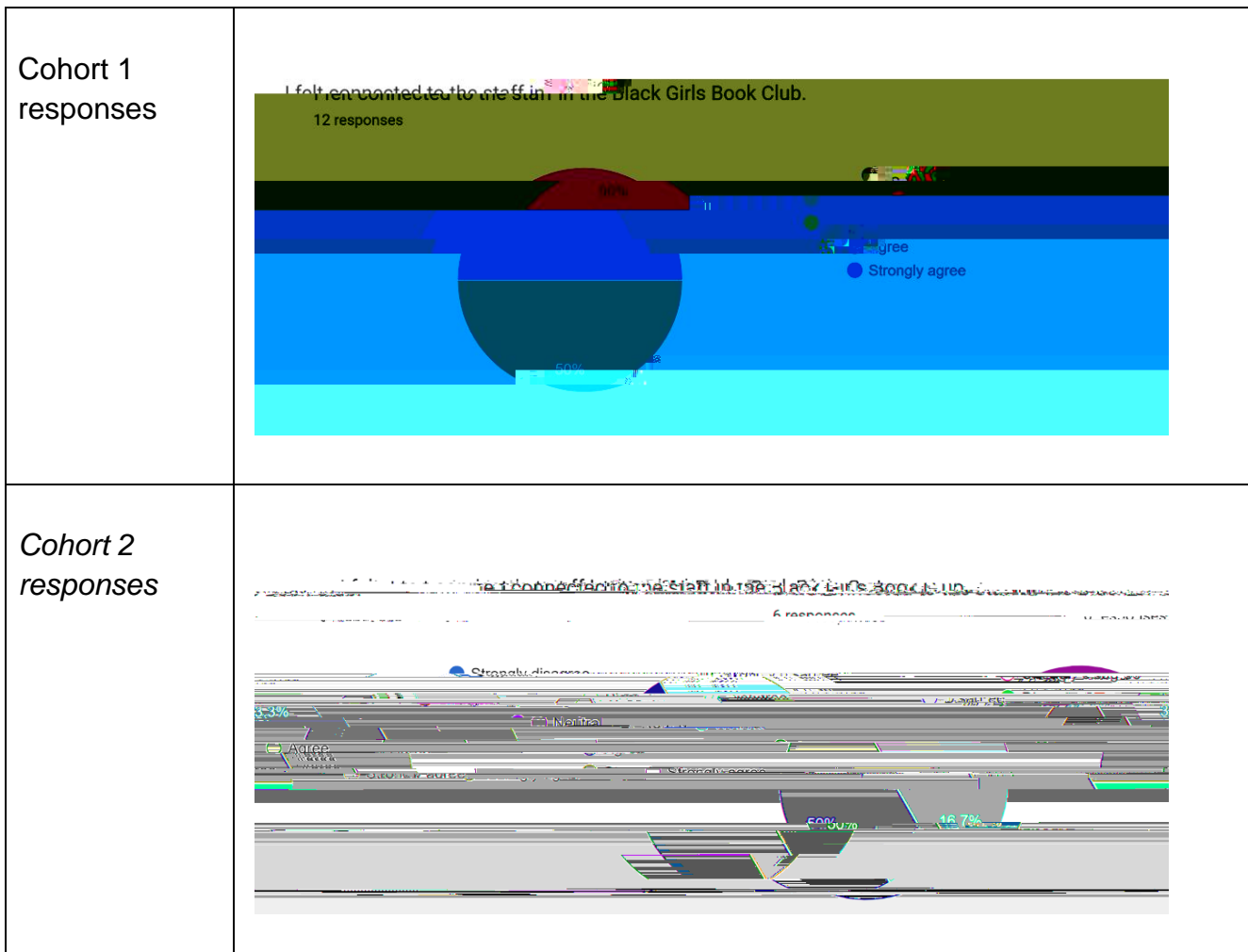
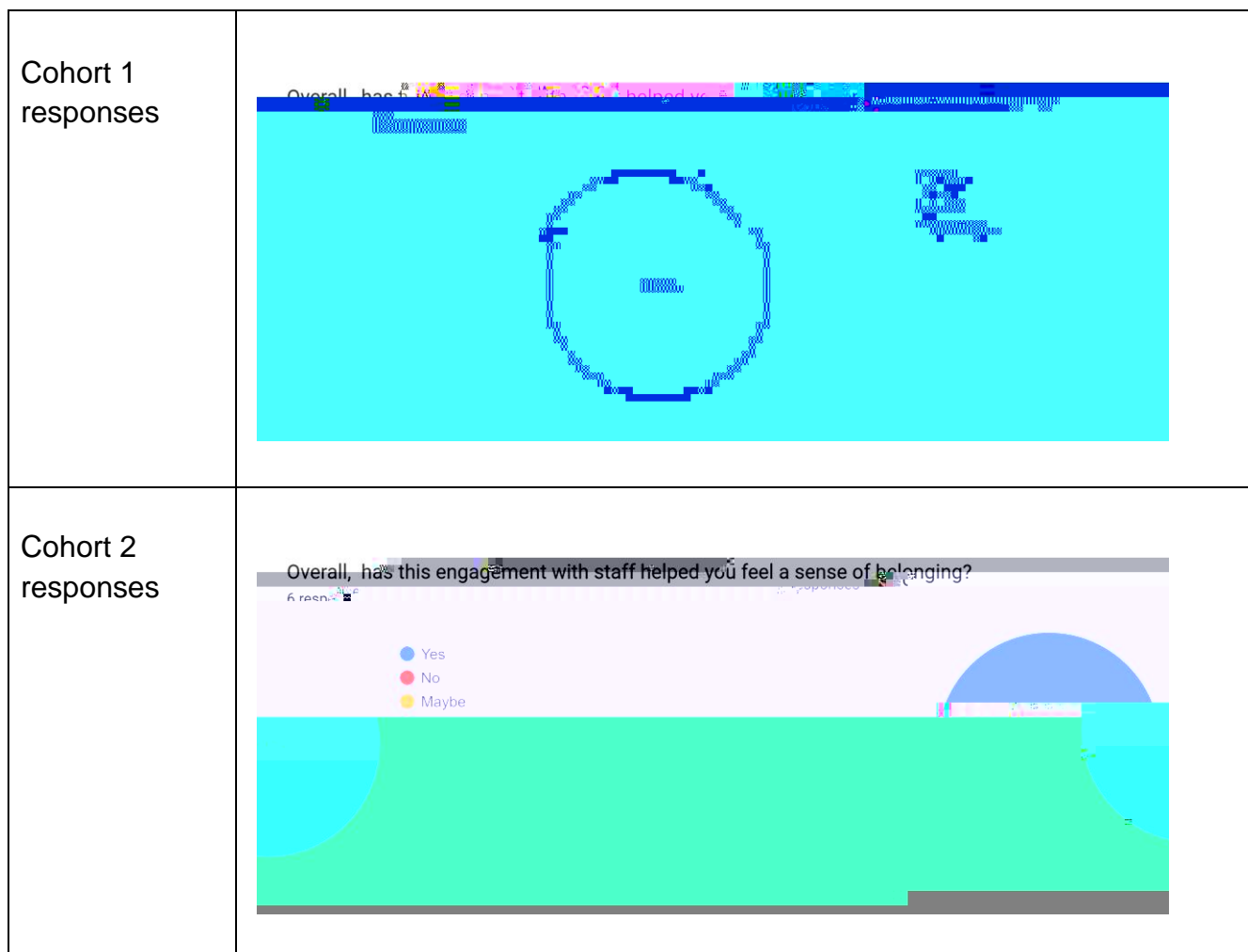


Figure 16 shows that 100% of the participants across both cohorts experienced a sense of belonging. (Participant, Cohort 2).

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 education. This sense of belonging has been widely documented in the literature as a key factor in student success and well-being.

Figure 16: Sense of Belonging



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

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

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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.

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

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 where they found 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.

One participant said, "It 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."

4. Cultivate a Space to H

One participant said, "It 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."

diversity of Black voices through literature. Having the ability to read stories from Black girls, from different countries, and their experiences allows me t

The iteration of the book club for Black girls was designed to counter negative

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

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their authentic selves.

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