

(Re)Claiming our Crowns: Celebrating Black Girls' Hair in Educational Spaces

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Black women's hair has long been a pillar of Black culture and community. However, hairstyles worn by Black women and girls are vilified by society and forced to conform to white, hegemonic standards of beauty. This has translated directly into educational spaces where Black girls experience heavy policing by school and district-wide policies that negatively impact their views of themselves and their hair. The push for, and subsequent stall of, the CROWN Act to be passed in US states has revealed just how deeply rooted hair discrimination is in society and schools. This editorial affirms and celebrates the role of hair in the Black community and its importance in educational institutions.

Keywords: Black Hair, Black Girls, Hair, Black Women

Introduction

"I love my hair because it's a reflection of my soul. It's dense, it's kinky, it's soft, it's textured, it's difficult, it's easy and it's fun. That's why I love my hair." -Tracee Ellis Ross

In 2022, Ketanji Brown Jackson sat in front of the United States Senate for her Supreme Court Confirmation Hearing. One of the major topics of discussion was her hair, graciously styled sisterlocks parted carefully to the side with beautiful curls at the ends. There was a collective awe amongst Black women who appreciated seeing a Black woman with an often vilified and highly prejudiced hairstyle nominated to the highest court. A Black woman's hair is arguably her most distinguishing physical trait, as it represents individuality, strength, and the indescribable beauty that makes us unique. Thus, for a moment, it seemed that Black women adorned in authentic hairstyles would not be judged based on their hair texture and style (Brown & Lemi, 2021). That moment was short-lived as the same week, a viral video of a young Black girl being forced to remove the beads from the end of her braids by the judges of a powerlifting competition was published online. While the video displayed a feel-good moment of support

between the young girl and her teammates, who rallied around her and helped her remove the beads, it also reignited a centuries-long debate on the policing of Black women and girls' hair.

The passage of the CROWN Act of 2022 by the United States House of Representatives affirmed that no person in the United States could be legally subjected to discrimination based on their hairstyle or texture. However, the bill remains stalled in the Senate and begs the question of what is a law when the mindsets of those in power have not changed. The strong relationship between Black women and girls and their hair has long withstood racialized and gendered experiences that have taken place within society. As such, Black hair is an integral part of Black culture. Unfortunately, negative perceptions of Black hair have driven Black women to conform their hair to White standards of beauty throughout history. Over time this can lead to negative self-perceptions that can have longstanding effects on Black girls. Like other social and cultural spaces, academic spaces are often the origins of these views for Black girls and women (Johnson & Bankhead, 2014).

As Black women educators who teach and have been taught in a system that has been damaging to our self-perceptions related to our hair, we recognize the importance of schools that affirm Black girls. For these reasons, legislation such as the CROWN Act should be passed to protect Black women and girls from targeted hair discrimination. If academic spaces genuinely strive to be culturally relevant, these spaces must intentionally merge students' cultures and the curriculum (Ladson-Billings, 2000). Academic spaces throughout the P-20 pipeline have a responsibility to reverse negative representations and perceptions associated with Black hair. As an integral part of Black culture, it is time for multicultural educators and equity-minded community stakeholders to affirm and uplift Black hair as we seek to better understand the deep connection between their hair and their schooling experiences.

This present editorial aims to examine the relationship between Black hair traditions as an extension of racial-gendered identity and the educational experiences of Black women and girls. Reflecting upon our experiences as Black women provides space to examine the implications of negative hair experiences on students' education and self-perceptions. By situating our experiences in Black Feminist Thought (Hill Collins, 1990), we can understand how racialized, gendered, and classist forms of discrimination impact our current relationship with our hair. Additionally, we recognize that many educators may not have the knowledge of Black hair that allows them the skills to affirm Black hair. To this end, we also propose recommendations for P-20 educators to center Black Hair in their classrooms.

I am My Hair: Black Women's Hair in Society

Dating back to ancient Africa, Black hair has been an essential part of Black history and represents resistance, strength, and beauty. African women would style their hair to represent their status, class, and wealth (Mbilishaka, 2019). During the Atlantic Slave Trade, grains were braided into Black women's hair to provide food for their journey, and braids were used to communicate messages during slavery (Byrd & Tharp, 2014; Hargo, 2011; Johnson, 2011; Johnson & Bankhead, 2014; Mbilishaka, 2018; Morrow, 1990). Contemporarily, the beauty shop and kitchen table have long been a power source of Black girlhood and womanhood within the

Black community. The first self-made Black woman millionaire, Madam C.J. Walker, built her empire on the importance of Black hair care. During the 1970s, Black women welcomed a new era of hair affirmation as the Black Power Movement promoted wearing natural hairstyles and afros to reject white standards of beauty (Garrin & Marcketti, 2018). Since, Black women have maintained Black hair care as a billion-dollar industry catered to the versatility and uniqueness of Black hair (Dunahoo & Smith, 2019).

Not only has Black hair maintained a role as an integral part of Black culture, but also popular culture. Social media channels and networks have been dedicated to the upkeep, maintenance, and celebration of Black hair. Though catered to Black women, Black hair trends supply society with the ideas that maintain popular culture and social media trends. Cornrows became “boxer braids,” and carefully slicked back baby hairs became popularized as sticky bangs on TikTok. Despite these truths, Black girls and women face discrimination for the same hairstyles they created while these styles are simultaneously worn and popularized by their White counterparts. Black girls and women are left to face the consequences, including removing their style, facing termination from their jobs, or losing opportunities. As Black women and girls navigate white spaces, they must ensure there is not a hair out of place because the slightest deviation from what is considered socially acceptable can lead to lasting problems. Within schools, Black girls face this same reality related to hair policies.

Black Hair Under Attack: A Summary of Prior Educational Research

Within the current context of schooling, Black hair is still under attack by those in power. Black girls often come under scrutiny for their beads being too loud or colorful, afros being too big, or braids and twists being too long. This makes Black girls more susceptible to violence and extreme disciplinary action for violating hair policies than their White counterparts (Hines & Carter, 2017). Flowers and Berry (2017) found that hair policies today create hostile environments that continue the legacy of the Black Codes of the post-Civil War era, which welcomed the violent oppression of African Americans. This is evident in the public instances of Black girls having their natural hair policed, such as the aforementioned experience of the powerlifter during her competition. However, Joseph-Salisbury and Connelly (2018) found that these public accounts are not isolated incidents and instead operate as an extension of racist conditions that systemically oppress Black people (pg. 2). School hair policies are deliberate attempts to criminalize Black girls.

Essien & Wood (2021) found that Black girls have their hair weaponized against them early in their schooling experiences. Black parents in Essien & Wood’s study stated that their daughters’ hair was seen as a marker for second-class citizenship and presumed defilement, which led to microaggressions by their white teachers. Additionally, as girls get older, their hair continues to operate as a barrier to physical education classes out of fear of hair harassment and their hair becoming frizzy or puffy (O’Brien-Richardson 2019; 2021). In these instances, Black hair is a consistent source of oppression in Black girls’ educational experiences.

How do we support Black girls when their hair is constantly under attack? Onnie Rogers, Versey, & Cielto (2021) found that hair is extremely valuable to Black girls’ identity

development. As such, Black hair must remain central to their schooling experiences. Brown and Gilbert (2021) found that Black hair has great utility in the arts, where students can tell their HairStory by centering Black hair in visual storytelling. Brooks and McNair (2015) found that Black children's literature maintains a longstanding commitment to producing a positive representation of Black life, particularly related to Black hair. In a content analysis of children's books written between 1979 and 2002, Brooks and McNair found children's books about hair had three main themes that affirmed all hair as good hair, its history in the Black community, and the bonding nature of hairstyling (pg. 302).

While there is a rich, emerging body of research centering Black hair within an educational context, voices are missing within the literature. Many studies on Black girls' hair are based on deficit perspectives such as discipline that does not often celebrate and affirm its versatility and beauty (Webb-Hasan, Elbert, & Jones, 2016; Young, 2020). Additionally, much of the research on Black hair and education center on early childhood education, physical education, and arts education, leaving a gap regarding core curriculums such as reading, mathematics, and science. Additionally, the focus on early childhood education leaves the experiences of Black girls in middle grades and high school left out of the conversation. Further research should examine the perspectives and feelings of Black girls currently in K-12 settings. This research should affirm Black girls and their hair and center ways to promote critical discussion on hair discrimination (Young, Butler, King, & Wandix-White, 2021). Additionally, practitioner-based research should be done that provides educators with the tools to affirm, center, and facilitate critical lessons on Black hair that provide a voice for Black girls to express themselves.

Queens without Their Crowns: Educational Policy, Praxis, and the CROWN Act

Black girls are consistently subjected to negative representations and conversations surrounding their hair in the media and society that translate directly into academic settings. Dress codes politicize Black hair in unprecedented ways that deny Black students, namely Black girls, humanity and opportunity (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda 2015). In most cases, schools are the origins of negative views of Black girlhood. School should not be an additional space where Black girls are fighting to survive their personhood in the pursuit of an education. It is legislation such as the CROWN Act that can potentially change the current state of Black girl hair in education when applied in classrooms and school districts. The CROWN act affirms that:

No person in the United States shall be subjected to a practice prohibited under section 1977 of the Revised Statutes (42 U.S.C. 1981), based on the person's hair texture or hairstyle, if that hair texture or that hairstyle is commonly associated with a particular race or national origin (including a hairstyle in which hair is tightly coiled or tightly curled, locs, cornrows, twists, braids, Bantu knots, and Afros).

The stall of the CROWN Act in the US Senate confirms the social and racial power held by Black hair. The first CROWN Act legislation was passed in 2019 in California and has since been defended across the United States. However, many states do not have this safeguard to

protect Black girls from harsh school policies. The reality is that people in power agree with the discrimination of Black women and girls based on hair.

In a classroom, school, and district that operates under the CROWN Act and believes in the importance of Black hair, Black girls should no longer face the consequences of having their hair styled in authentic ways. Black girls deserve to be protected, and the CROWN Act provides that not only within employment opportunities but also in schools. Black girls' hair has great potential to transform education for Black girls. Teachers can center Black hair in lessons that are beneficial to all students or provide space to critically analyze the role and importance of Black hair in society.

Conclusion

A popular saying in the Black community proclaims that “my hair doesn’t need to be fixed, society’s view of beauty is what’s broken.” Every kink, curl, and coil is a part of the lived experiences of Black women and girls dating back to Ancient Africa. The beauty of Black hair should be affirmed and celebrated in all facets of society. P-12 institutions particularly have a responsibility to Black girls to affirm their full personhood, including their hair. There are several ways educational institutions can do this:

1. P-12 institutions should increase the number of children’s and young adult literature affirming and teaching about Black hair. More positive representation within the school community can lead to positive views of self for Black girls and fewer microaggressions from non-Black students.
2. Educational institutions should reevaluate dress code policies that politicize and vilify traditionally Black hairstyles such as braids, twists, and locs. Instead, these institutions should celebrate the uniqueness of Black hair and welcome the diversity of hairstyles grown out of Black culture.
3. Educators should learn more about the history and significance of Black hair. Understanding this part of Black culture can help educators be culturally responsive and accept Black hair in their classrooms. There are many print and digital resources, such as Ayana Byrd and Lori Tharps’ *Hair Story: Untangling the Roots of Black Hair in America* and the podcast episode *Tangled Roots: A History of Black Hair* are excellent starting points for educators wanting to learn about Black hair.
4. Educators should integrate Black hair in their lessons across the curriculum, including core curriculum (mathematics, science, English, etc.), to broaden the reach and representation of Black hair in the school community. Eglash and Bennett’s (2009) work with cornrows and African fractals and Brooks and McNair’s (2015) Hairstory projects are excellent starting points for educators aspiring to implement these lessons.

The hair experiences Black girls have in schools largely influence how they view their hair post-graduation and beyond. While these recommendations are not exhaustive, this list serves as a start to aiding Black women and girls in (re)claiming their crowns, wearing them proudly, and without fear of repercussion. With this change, Black girls’ can continue to shift their sense of self and identity development positively, thus improving their educational experiences.

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