

“Doing Hair” and Literacy

in an Afterschool Reading and Writing Workshop for African-American Adolescent Girls

by Daneell Edwards

The term “doing hair” is utterly familiar. However, while the term can refer to simple acts of combing, brushing, washing, and styling hair, in the culture of adolescent African-American girls, doing hair is a social practice that represents power, creativity, and sometimes popularity.

This article describes a three-month afterschool reading and writing workshop for African-American adolescent girls that focused on doing hair. The workshop, which I facilitated as part of the research study described below, had four main objectives:

- To provide African-American adolescent girls with the opportunity to talk, read, and write about a cultural topic that is typically not sanctioned in school
- To promote critical thinking by inviting the girls to examine why hair matters to them and to view hair from cultural, historical, and socio-political perspectives
- To encourage the girls to reflect on their reading and writing experiences about hair
- To give the girls an opportunity to share their knowledge with others

In the process of meeting these goals, the workshop provided participants with the opportunity to engage in literacy activities centered around a topic near and dear to their hearts. When allowed, at least partially, to direct their own reading and writing around a topic that mattered to them, the girls showed clear interest and engagement in such activities, to an extent that suggests



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that school educators, community members, and after-school providers would do well to acknowledge the interest of African-American girls in doing hair.

Why Hair Matters

Why is hair so important to African-American women and girls? According to Banks (2000), scholars relate the importance of doing hair to its connections to “Africa, construction of race, enslavement, skin color, self esteem, ritual, esthetics, appropriate grooming practices, images of beauty, politics, identity, and the intersection of race and gender” (p. 7). Some African-American women associate doing hair with cherished rituals (Byrd & Tharps, 2001; hooks, 2001; Rooks, 1996). For example, cultural critic bell hooks (2001) states that hair pressing, a process for straightening hair, was a ritual in African-American women’s culture in the period before the civil rights movement. She says that “pressing hair [was] not a sign of [Black girls’] longing to be White...[or their] quest to be beautiful.... It was a sign of [their] desire to be women” (p. 111). She describes this rite as “an exclusive moment when Black women (even those who did not know one another well) might meet at home or in the beauty parlor to talk with one another, to listen to the talk” (p. 111).

For others, African-American hair practices are significant because they are ways to contest “mainstream notions of beauty” (Banks, 2000, p. 28). The popularity of the Afro in the 1960s was a political statement that represented authenticity and pride in the African-American community (Rooks, 1996). In the 1980s, Black women in corporate America adopted cornrows and braids, traditionally worn by young children, to signify their African cultural heritage (Byrd & Tharps, 2001).

While African-American adolescents in the 21st century may not identify with hair pressing as a ritual, many understand the social aspects of doing hair that bell hooks addresses: Doing hair allows them to bond with their friends by talking and listening to each other. While contemporary African-American girls may not view hair as a political statement as some did during the civil rights era, they understand the power of using hair “to express themselves” (Ferrell, 1999).

Though their peers often admire and respect this creative expression, African-American girls’ interest in

hair is rarely embraced in school or supported in out-of-school settings. Lisa Delpit (2002), a prominent African-American educator, argues that some African-American children are not motivated to learn because materials presented to them do not connect to their own interests. What would it look like if an afterschool program embedded literacy in a cultural practice that matters to many African-American adolescent girls?

Situating Literacy in a Meaningful Cultural Practice

I conducted my study of a reading and workshop focused on hair in a community center located in a predominantly poor working-class African-American neighborhood in inner-city Nashville. Over a thousand neighborhood residents have been served by the center, which provides educational programs, arts and crafts, games, and athletic programs for young people.

Workshop Participants

Two months before the workshop began, I attended a parent open house at the community center and two regular meetings with community leaders to solicit assistance in recruiting adolescent girls. I distributed colorful brochures describing the workshop and its benefits. In selecting participants, one of my main objectives was to choose girls who loved reading and writing. My second criterion was that they be interested in learning about hair. My first group of six girls, ages 13 and 14, expressed to me their love of reading and writing—which, as I will discuss below, turned out to be exaggerated—and their interest in hair.

Ultimately, 10 African-American adolescent girls, ages 12 to 16, participated in the workshop sessions; five of these participated regularly. The one-hour sessions took place on Tuesdays and Thursdays in the community center’s conference room. Most of the girls regularly attended afterschool programs at the community center before the project began. Most attended a public school close to the community center; eight were in middle school and two in high school. Over half said in interviews that they had scored below average in the reading component of the Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test and were therefore required to take a remedial literacy course.

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The five regular participants chose their own pseudonyms and frequently used them during workshop sessions. Shanika and Sheterica, 13-year-old seventh graders, were in the same science class and ate lunch together every day at school. Mia, a 12-year-old sixth grader in the same middle school, joined after the fourth workshop session. All three had started attending the community center afterschool program six months earlier. Sheterica told me that her mother had begun to punish her for visiting the community center daily, so she decided to come only on Tuesdays and Thursdays so that she could participate in the workshop. Aquanasha, a 15-year-old ninth grader, originally told me she was 14 years old because she thought she would not be able to participate if I knew her actual age.

The oldest participant was Montrice, who was 16 and in the eleventh grade. I met Montrice in summer 2003, when I volunteered to facilitate a dramatic play at the community center. Montrice was not a participant in the play but occasionally assisted me with the younger kids. She seldom spoke more than a few words to me. Therefore, I was surprised when she asked, after the fourth session, if she could attend the hair workshop. I told her supervisor in the community center's Youth at Work program that Montrice wanted to participate. The supervisor responded, "Montrice? You mean Montrice Apple? Are you sure Montrice wants to join?" I assured her that, yes, we were talking about the same Montrice. The supervisor later mentioned how pleased she was that Montrice had chosen to be a part of the study. Initially Montrice was to serve as my assistant, as she had during the summer, but she soon decided to be a full participant with the other girls, limiting the assistant role to occasional help with setting up and storing the camcorder and other equipment.

Data Collection

In this research study, I collected data on participants over an academic semester, a three-month period in spring 2004. Methods included observations of participants, field notes, journal entries composed by the participants, audiotapes of interviews with the girls, and videotapes of all components of the workshop.

Workshop Components

The reading and writing workshop included the components of a "focus unit" (Moss, 1995) with modifications to meet my four objectives. A focus unit "is a series of literary experiences organized around a central focus (a literary theme, genre, author, topic, or narrative element or device)" (Moss, 1995, p. 53). In the original design of the reading and writing workshop, the focus unit consisted of four components:

- A read-aloud experience
- Self-selected literary experiences
- Journal writing
- Creation of an original text

As will be seen below, over time, participants modified parts of this design to match their own interests.

In early workshop sessions, the first 30 minutes were set aside for reading aloud followed by group discussion. Most of the passages I read to the girls came from *Tenderheaded: A Comb-bending Collection of Hair Stories* (Harris & Johnson, 2001), a book of poems, stories, comics, and folktales about hair. The purpose of the read-aloud experience was to model fluent reading and to encourage the girls to relate the text to their lived experiences, to question the authors' stances, and to stretch their thinking.

After the read-aloud experience, approximately 15 minutes were designated for independent or buddy reading. The girls generally chose picture books, chapter books, and colorfully illustrated nonfiction books about hair care. They rarely selected the nonfiction books that emphasized the historical, social, cultural, and political aspects of Black hair because, as two girls told me, these books had "over ten chapters" and no illustrations.

For the journal-writing component, I gave each girl a decorated notebook in which she could respond to questions and ideas from the previous components. This component was included to help the adolescents reflect on their workshop experiences. The amount of time set aside for journal writing varied from session to session; the girls also had the opportunity to write during the first two components and during the last fifteen minutes of each session. Toward the end of each session, the girls typically read their journal entries to the group.

One of the reasons African-American girls love doing hair is that it provides them social control. I tried to mirror this principle in designing the workshop, so that most components allowed the girls to share control with me.

The final component of the focus unit was designed to allow the adolescents to share their knowledge with others. The original text the girls chose to create was a commercial set in a beauty shop, which served to inform others about what they had learned in their rich discussions about hair. The girls brainstormed and exchanged ideas, wrote their lines, and rehearsed in the last four workshop sessions. The girls presented their commercial on the last day of the workshop, named “Thank-You Day” by one of the girls to let me, as facilitator, know that she appreciated her three-month experience.

In planning this reading and writing workshop, I selected a thematic topic that was meaningful and inviting to adolescent girls. Building on the works of such writers as Alvermann, Young, Green, and Wisenbaker (1999), Delpit (2002), Lee (1993), and Mahiri (1998), I developed a literacy program designed to legitimize participants’ cultural practices. One of the reasons African-American girls love doing hair is that it provides them social control. I tried to mirror this principle in designing the workshop, so that most components allowed the girls to share control with me. The one component I controlled almost exclusively, the read-aloud experience, changed over time as I learned more about the girls’ motivations for participating in the workshop and their ways of doing literacy.

Tapping into Participants’ Motivations

In group discussions and interviews, workshop participants gave explicit and implicit reasons for participating in this voluntary activity. The fact that the workshop was designed to feed into these motivations helped ensure that the girls remained with the workshop long enough to benefit from it.

To Do Hair

As I expected, most of the girls’ initial motivation for participating in the workshop was their interest in hair.

In informal conversations and interviews, the girls said that they had envisioned the workshop as similar to cosmetology school; they expected to learn to do a variety of hairstyles on mannequins and be graded on their performance. Starting with the fifth session, I included a mannequin with real hair in the workshop. The mannequin came with the name “Miss Jenny” written on its neck. Montrice told the girls that this was the name of the hair, not of the mannequin. After an intense voting session, the girls agreed to name the mannequin Tia Lafred. In the following session, they proudly expanded the name to Princessa Tia Lafred. As this naming process shows, the girls adopted the mannequin as their mascot. They rarely argued over who would have access to a book, but I often saw them negotiating over who would style Princessa’s hair and for how long.

The environment sometimes resembled a beauty shop filled with books. For example, in the seventh session, the girls replaced my read-aloud experience

with round-robin style reading, with each girl reading aloud one chapter of *Junie B. Jones Is a Beauty Shop Guy* (Park, 1998). As they took turns reading, they co-constructed the conference room into a beauty shop. Mia braided Princessa’s hair, stopping only to read aloud her self-assigned chapter. Girls who were not reading from the book were styling each other’s hair. As the two copies of the book circulated among the girls, so did the girls’ roles in the workshop, as they served as readers, hairstylists, clients, fashion critics, talkers, and listeners.

To Learn

When I asked the girls why they came to the workshop sessions, two said, “to learn.” Aquanasha stated in an interview that she came because she wanted to learn how to do hair. When I asked some participants to write in their journals about what they had learned in the



workshop, Aquanasha wrote that she learned about how her hair is different from white people's hair. Montrice responded that she attended the workshop to become "culturistic." When one of the girls asked her to clarify, she stated, "to get to know more about our culture." Similarly, Mia said that she attended the workshop to learn about "Black people."

Although I repeatedly used the term *workshop*, the girls consistently referred to the workshop as *class*. They regarded me as the teacher of this class; in the beginning, they seldom said my name but simply called me "the teacher." Later, more of them began calling me "Ms. Daneell" as well as "the hair teacher." This notion of each workshop as class and me as the teacher suggests that learning is one reason the girls came to the workshop. However, my observations suggest that reading and writing were not the main reasons the girls continued to participate. Although they read and wrote in every workshop session, most of the girls would not reach for a book until I said something like "Break off and get a book" or "It's time to read." In "class," reading was an assignment initiated by "the teacher."

To "Carve Out Free Spaces"

Elaine Richardson (2003) argues that African American literacies are "created to carve out free spaces in oppressive locations such as the classroom" (p. 76). The girls invoked such agency in our workshop sessions by producing a "class" centered around their interests and needs. For instance, they created space to talk about topics that interested them, including some that were unrelated to hair, such as methods of birth control and their relationships with boys.

They also expected answers to questions that they were unable to obtain in other institutional spaces. In doing so, they found ways to carve out free spaces. For example, I overheard Shanika telling a group of girls that the movie *Bring It On* left her with a question, which she whispered to the group: "What's an uber-dyke?" When Shanika found that her peers didn't know, she told me she had a question, and the following exchange (video-tape, April 6, 2004) ensued.

Shanika: (Looking directly at me) I be tryin' to express my feelings and I can't expr.... Like, this is a hair class, right, and it ain't but like all girls in here.

Aquanasha: Boys be in here too.

Shanika: And you being an older lady. Not trying to say you old. You just look like...

Montrice: (Quickly turning to address me) That mean you should shut the door.

Mia: /She's an elder in here/

Montrice: Because her questions be like... (raised left hand with spread fingers to the left side of face) Ah.

Shanika: Nah, I'm not for that today because she's a hair teacher. I asked my teen living teacher and she looked at me and she said get out of her classroom. (Montrice laughs.) But she a teen living teacher, though. And she should answer my question.

Mia: (Looking at me) What's a ouva-dyke?

Shanika: Girl, you loud. We gon' get put out.

Montrice: I told her to shut the door, and she didn't want to shut the door.

It became clear in the course of the workshop that the girls' attitude toward reading depended in large part on the kind of reading in which they engaged—not only the texts they chose, but also the format for the reading.

Shanika prefaces her question by letting me know that she attempts to express her feelings without success. Though she does not mention the social context or institutional space that keeps her from expressing herself, she does immediately refer to the "hair class" as a space that may allow her to ask her question and have it answered. Montrice aids Shanika in carving this space by telling me to shut the door. The need to physically separate their free space from the influence of those who have the

authority to silence them is evident in Shanika's retort to Mia, "We gon' get put out."

In carving out free spaces, the girls created, in some cases, an adolescent-directed "class." Montrice directed me, the adult facilitator, to shut the door and later expressed her disappointment that I did not obey her orders. In other incidents, the girls commanded their peers to answer their questions, to listen to them, and even to leave the room if one of them acted or spoke inappropriately according to their implicit rules. Sheterica suggested to me that if a girl missed a certain number of classes, then she should be barred from participating in the study. The girls also changed the format of the read-aloud component during the course of the workshop, as discussed below.

Attitudes toward Reading

Though all the girls expressed their love for reading and writing during the recruitment process, these initial responses were different from their responses during interviews and informal talks after the workshop began. It became clear in the course of the workshop that the girls' attitude toward reading depended in large part on the *kind* of reading in which they engaged—not only the texts they chose, but also the format for the reading. As the workshop format gradually changed in response to their preferences, I saw that the girls actually had a relatively positive attitude toward reading.

Expressed Attitudes

"I just don't like reading. I have to be honest; I hate it." Sheterica's earnest response to my interview question was echoed by many of her peers. Sheterica, Aquanesha, and Shatara (a participant who attended a few of the workshop sessions) all viewed reading as a boring, laborious activity that involved trudging through lots of small print. Even participants who professed to enjoy reading typically regarded it as an assignment, certainly not a top priority. Shanika, who said that she liked "everything about reading," also said that she would choose talking with friends or watching a wrestling match on television over reading a book. Through interviews and observations in the workshop sessions, I learned that less than half of the girls actually liked to read. Most liked to talk, and all loved to do hair.

"I'm perfectly fine with [reading]." Careful analyses of the reading logs, interview transcripts, and field notes show that many of the girls were, as Montrice expressed, "perfectly fine" with reading particular texts, particularly in a social context. During the self-selected literary component of the third workshop session, I told the three girls participating that day that they had the option to

write on poster paper posted on the wall, write in journals, or read. Sheterica and Aquanesha began writing on the poster paper, while Shanika began to read *Kids Talk Hair: An Instruction Book for Grown-ups and Kids* (Ferrell, 1999), a hair-care book filled with colorful illustrations of hairstyles. When she read a passage about the harm chemicals can do to hair, she stopped reading to warn the other two girls about the effects of chemical relaxers.

She commanded Sheterica to read that portion in the book. Sheterica stopped writing to read the few sentences aloud, ending with, "and that's not cool." Shanika corrected her: "cute, not cool," and Sheterica laughed at her miscue. Shanika then began reading excerpts of the book to both of the other girls, frequently stopping to make comments. Sheterica also voluntarily read sections aloud. When they finished that book, Sheterica and Aquanesha reached for other hair-care books and began reading both silently and aloud. The girls talked about the pictures in the texts and related passages to cartoon characters, neighbors, friends, and themselves. The girls collectively read from seven books in that session. This incident showed that the girls were "perfectly fine" with reading when they could read together at their leisure and discuss texts from their own perspective. There were many other sessions in which the

girls read aloud to each other and talked about texts, particularly when I, as facilitator, phased out of the group.

Reading Practices That Engage Adolescent Girls

Changes gradually developed in the read-aloud component of the workshop as I learned more about the girls' attitudes and perceptions about reading. In the first workshop sessions, as I read aloud, most of the girls were engaging in surreptitious talk rather than showing signs of engagement such as leaning forward in their seats. I



RECOMMENDED BOOKS ON HAIR

Picture or Literature Books

- DeJoie, P. (1997). *My hair is beautiful . . . because it's mine*. Berkeley, CA: Group West.
- Deveaux, A. (1987). *An enchanted hair tale*. New York: HarperTrophy.
- Grimes, N. (1997). *Wild, wild hair*. New York: Scholastic.
- Herron, C. (1997) *Nappy hair*. New York: Dragonfly Books.
- hooks, b. (1999). *Happy to be nappy*. New York: Hyperion Books.
- Tarpley, N. A. (1998). *I love my hair*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Yarbrough, C. (1979). *Cornrows*. New York: Putnam & Grosset.

Books on Hair Care and Maintenance

- Bonner, L. B. (1990). *Good hair: For colored girls who've considered weaves when the chemicals became too ruff*. Oakland, CA: Sapphire Publications.
- Collison, M. N-K. (2002). *It's all good hair: The guide to styling and grooming Black children's hair*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Ferrell, P. (1999). *Kids talk hair: An instruction book for grown-ups & kids*. Washington: Cornrows & Co.
- Ferrell, P. (1996). *Let's talk hair: Every Black woman's personal consultation for healthy growing hair*. Washington: Cornrows & Co.
- Fletcher, B. (2000). *Why are Black women losing their hair?* Seat Pleasant, MD: Unity Publishers.

Young Adult Nonfiction

- Banks, I. (1999). *Hair matters: Beauty, power, and Black women's consciousness*. New York: New York Press.
- Bryd, A. (2001). *Hair story: Untangling the roots of Black hair in America*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Rooks, N. (1996). *Hair raising: Beauty, culture, and African American women*. Newark, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

was surprised, because my former elementary and middle school students had often enjoyed my read-alouds.

Having observed that talking was a more popular activity than reading, I began the third session by asking the girls to share what they wanted to know about hair. In response to one of their questions, I read a short folktale on why African-American hair texture is typically different from that of Caucasian and Asian people. Though the girls were more receptive to the read-aloud, they did not engage in deep discussion. So then in the fourth session, I not only gave the girls the opportunity to talk in the beginning of the workshop but also initiated shared reading. The girls formed a circle and chorally read the lyrics to the song "Straight and Nappy: Good and Bad Hair," written by Bill Lee (1988) for Spike Lee's movie, *School Daze*. The girls were highly engaged in this activity.

Though the girls appeared to enjoy choral reading, the type of reading they initiated on their own was round-robin reading, with each girl taking a turn reading aloud to the group. Round-robin reading has been cast unfavorably in literacy research (Opitz & Rasinski, 1998), but the girls had distinct reasons for favoring this format. All the girls, even those who said they hated to read, stated that they liked to read out loud. A number of them admitted that they like the way they sound when they read and like to have others listen to them. The girls sought to take center stage (Goffman, 1959) and to perform for each other, even if they did not read fluently.

Besides offering a chance to perform, round-robin reading is also a social activity. When I asked in a focus group whether the girls liked to have adults read to them, several said they did. Sheterica and Aquanasha said, since adults read faster than young people, they can get through the book more quickly when an adult reads aloud. So I then asked them why they hadn't invited me to join when the group read the Junie B. Jones book in the seventh session. The girls emphatically replied that the book was "foul," very good, so that they wanted to read it. Sheterica said that they had created "a line" that they didn't want broken. A line can be a link; the round-robin reading allowed the girls to form a social connection. A line can also be boundary, in this case a boundary that excluded the authority figure, "the teacher." The girls, rather than the teacher, owned the round-robin reading. Though some girls liked having adults read so that the book could be finished quickly, when the text was something they liked, they wanted to savor it like a good meal in the company of friends.

The ways in which the girls chose to do literacy was in many ways different from what I had planned. They preferred to discuss first and then read, and then they preferred to read to each other rather than to listen to me or to read silently. These literacy practices gave them the opportunity to perform literacy—to bring it to life—with their peers.

Evaluation

I designed this afterschool reading and writing workshop in the hope of providing African-American adolescent girls with a "free space" in which they could learn about a topic important to them by reading, writing, talking, and thinking critically about hair. As I read and reread field notes, viewed and reviewed videotapes, and

listened carefully to audiotaped interviews, I concluded that the workshop met, to varying extents, the four goals outlined at the beginning of this article.

Goal 1. To provide African-American adolescent girls with the opportunity to talk, read, and write about a cultural topic that is typically not sanctioned in school

Throughout the workshop, the girls had opportunities to engage in dialogue about hair and other topics. When the workshop format changed slightly to begin each session with group discussion, the girls often asked each other—and me—probing questions. They also engaged in reading and writing activities centered around hair, not all of which were part of my original plan. The Junie B. Jones book was not part of my original collection, and round-robin reading was not part of my workshop format. After reading books—collectively, more often than not—the girls would usually write a few sentences in their journals summarizing what they read. Toward the end of the workshop, I began to challenge the girls to expand on their writing; I would ask them a question based on a point that was made in a previous session and ask them to elaborate in their journals. Most of the girls appreciated this dialogue approach to writing.

Goal 2. To promote critical thinking by inviting the girls to examine why hair matters to them and to view hair from cultural, historical, and socio-political perspectives

The girls were challenged to go to the root of the social and cultural phenomenon of hair by exploring the many factors that influenced their ideas and beliefs. For example, they discussed how commercialism has influenced the way African-American women and girls talk and think about hair. At times, such discussions created tension, because the girls had to question and examine their beliefs, as was the case after they read Bill Lee's "Straight and Nappy" (1988). I presented texts that contradicted their views, encouraged them to hold multiple perspectives, and consistently challenged them to explain why they held certain viewpoints. As the workshop progressed, their discussions became more illuminating as they continued to develop and evaluate their own positions on the topic of hair.

Goal 3. To encourage the girls to reflect on their reading and writing experiences about hair

I wanted the girls to think about their literacy experiences and what they did as readers and writers. In the journal-writing component of one session, I gave each girl a reading log listing most of the books available in the workshop. The girls checked off the books they had read alone or with others, those they had not read but wanted to, and those they did not want to read. We then discussed why most of them read picture books and colorfully illustrated hair-care books but avoided longer nonfiction books. Besides encouraging them to think about their reading experience, I also gave them opportunities to reflect on their writing, most often by approaching them one-on-one and asking them questions about it.

Goal 4. To give the girls an opportunity to share their knowledge with others

The method of knowledge sharing the girls chose was a commercial that stressed ethnic pride. In the beginning of the workshop, some girls thought that the fact that some African-American people's hair does not grow as long as that of most white people was a sign of inferiority. After they learned about the tightly coiled follicles of most African-American hair and the advantages of this texture, I would often hear them exclaim that they were "happy to be nappy" (hooks, 1999). The commercial was videotaped so the girls could share copies with family and friends. At least one participant continued to share her knowledge: A few months after the workshop, I spoke briefly with Shanika. She said that she often talked about hair with her grandmother, who had recently asked her how she knew so much about hair. Shanika said, "I learned it from the hair class."

If authority figures in institutional settings do not embrace adolescents' social and cultural practices, they should not expect adolescents to accept willingly the social practices adults value, such as reading and writing.

Implications

Though over half of the girls in the workshop were relegated to a remedial literacy class in school, and though few were truly interested in reading, five of them held sustained interest in a reading and writing workshop over a three-month period. One reason for this interest is that the reading and writing workshop validated the girls' interest in doing hair. The workshop was successful not only because the topic was interesting to the girls, but also

because actually doing hair was one of the activities available along with reading and writing. Delpit (2002) convincingly argues that educators' negative responses to children's language often result in the children's "rejection of the school language and everything they have to offer" (p. 47). If authority figures in institutional settings do not embrace adolescents' social and cultural practices, they should not expect adolescents to accept willingly the social practices adults value, such as reading and writing.

Another reason the girls continued to be involved in the workshop is that they had opportunities to take ownership of it. Atwell (1988) says that learners need ownership, or control and power, over a space. The girls viewed the workshop as a "class" of their own. They were free to talk, to create and modify rules, to offer me suggestions on how to conduct the workshop, and to keep their peers in check. Fostering African-American adolescent girls' sense of ownership may require allowing them to co-design workshops with an adult facilitator. As was the case when the girls in the hair workshop chose to read round-robin style, other girls, working with an adult facilitator, may be able to co-construct a learning environment that meets their interests and satisfies their expectations.

Ingrid Banks (2000), a professor of Black studies, argues that African-American females discuss hair more than any other topic. Inviting this social and cultural topic into a reading and writing workshop in which all participants were African-American females afforded them a safe environment where they could learn with and from each other and from me. They appropriated and modified school-like practices to meet their needs and interests. My findings suggest that afterschool programs can and should use adolescents' cultural practices and interests to empower young people to engage in literacy practices while allowing participants to choose the kinds of practices that best meet their needs.

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