

Black Girl in the Middle

To my precious daughters, Madison and Miah, you are the light in my life, the reason I continue to push forward. May you always walk in confidence, knowing that your voice, your presence, and your dreams matter.

And to every Black girl who has ever felt caught in the middle—between expectations and aspirations, between who the world says you should be and who you truly are—this is for you. May you always stand boldly in your truth, knowing that you are powerful, worthy, and enough.

Black Girl in the Middle

Five Transformative Practices
to Make Schools Better
for Black Girls

Melody Hawkins

CORWIN

Copyrighted Material, www.corwin.com. Not intended for distribution.

For promotional review or evaluation purposes only. Do not distribute, share, or upload to any large language model or data repository.



FOR INFORMATION:

Corwin
A SAGE Company
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320
(800) 233-9936
www.corwin.com

SAGE Publications Ltd.
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP
United Kingdom

SAGE Publications India Pvt. Ltd.
Unit No 323-333, Third Floor, F-Block
International Trade Tower Nehru Place
New Delhi 110 019
India

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte. Ltd.
18 Cross Street #10-10/11/12
China Square Central
Singapore 048423

Vice President and
Editorial Director: Monica Eckman
Acquisitions Editor: Megan Bedell
Senior Content
Development Editor: Mia Rodriguez
Content Development and
Operations Manager: Lucas Schleicher
Senior Editorial
Assistant: Natalie Delpino
Production Editor: Tori Mirsadjadi
Copy Editor: Colleen Brennan
Typesetter: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd.
Cover Designer: Gail Buschman
Marketing Manager: Melissa Duclos

Copyright © 2026 by Corwin Press, Inc.

All rights reserved. Except as permitted by U.S. copyright law, no part of this work may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

When forms and sample documents appearing in this work are intended for reproduction, they will be marked as such. Reproduction of their use is authorized for educational use by educators, local school sites, and/or noncommercial or nonprofit entities that have purchased the book.

All third-party trademarks referenced or depicted herein are included solely for the purpose of illustration and are the property of their respective owners. Reference to these trademarks in no way indicates any relationship with, or endorsement by, the trademark owner.

No AI training. Without in any way limiting the author's and publisher's exclusive rights under copyright, any use of this publication to "train" generative artificial intelligence (AI) or for other AI uses is expressly prohibited. The publisher reserves all rights to license uses of this publication for generative AI training or other AI uses.

Printed in the United States of America

Paperback ISBN 978-1-0719-8212-9

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

25 26 27 28 29 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

DISCLAIMER: This book may direct you to access third-party content via web links, QR codes, or other scannable technologies, which are provided for your reference by the author(s). Corwin makes no guarantee that such third-party content will be available for your use and encourages you to review the terms and conditions of such third-party content. Corwin takes no responsibility and assumes no liability for your use of any third-party content, nor does Corwin approve, sponsor, endorse, verify, or certify such third-party content.

Copyrighted Material, www.corwin.com. Not intended for distribution.

For promotional review or evaluation purposes only. Do not distribute, share, or upload to any large language model or data repository.

Contents

Acknowledgments	ix
About the Author	xiii
Navigating <i>Black Girl in the Middle</i>	xv

INTRODUCTION	1
WHY IS SHE SITTING ALONE?	1
WHY FOCUS ON MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS?	10
FIVE PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING LEARNING FOR BLACK GIRLS	11
USING THIS BOOK	13

PART 1: REFLECT ON BELIEFS AND BIASES 19

1 IT'S NOT MY FAULT; IT IS MY PROBLEM	21
BLACK GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL EQUITY	21
CLAIMING THE PATH FORWARD	29
2 PRACTICE ONE—IDENTIFY YOUR BELIEFS	35
UNPACKING EXPERIENCES: THE RESEARCH ON BLACK GIRLS AND THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL BIAS	39
STUDY 1	40
STUDY 2	43

PART 2: BUILD COMPASSIONATE AND SUPPORTIVE CONNECTIONS 53

3 PRACTICE TWO—PLANT THE SEAD	55
IMAGINE THIS	55
SEAD IS THE <i>SEED</i>	56

	SEAD: A WHOLE CHILD APPROACH TO STUDENT SUCCESS	57
	SEAD'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING BLACK GIRLS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL	58
	CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE SEAD	59
	THE EDUCATORS' ROLE IN ADVANCING SEAD FOR BLACK MIDDLE SCHOOL GIRLS	61
	COMMUNITY EDUCATORS AND PARTNERS: EXTENDING SEAD BEYOND THE CLASSROOM	68
4	PRACTICE THREE—LISTEN WITH COMPASSION	75
	FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE	77
	HONORING THE VOICES OF BLACK GIRLS	78
	COMPASSIONATE LISTENING PROMPTS TO BUILD TRUST AND SAFETY	82
	THE IMPACT OF COMPASSIONATE LISTENING	83
	THE POWER OF COMPASSIONATE LISTENING	86
	PART 3: ADVOCATE FOR HER DEVELOPMENT AND CHILDHOOD	89
5	PRACTICE FOUR—ENCOURAGE POSITIVE SELF-TALK	91
	WHAT IS SELF-TALK?	92
	POSITIVE SELF-TALK IN LEARNING SPACES	93
	MIAH'S STORY	95
	LAYLA'S STORY	97
	PRACTICAL STRATEGIES FOR ENCOURAGING POSITIVE SELF-TALK	100
6	PRACTICE FIVE—ADVOCATE FOR THEIR GIRLHOOD	107
	STAND UP FOR BLACK GIRLS	108
	THEY SHOULD KNOW BETTER . . . RIGHT?	109
	THE ADULTIFICATION OF BLACK GIRLS	110
	WHERE TO BEGIN: DISMANTLING ADULTIFICATION BIAS	113

UNDERSTANDING THE DEVELOPING MIND	114
NEURODIVERGENCE AND THE DEVELOPING MIND OF BLACK MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS	116
WHERE TO BEGIN: RE-DRESSING EXPECTATIONS	118
7 PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES	127
THE NECESSITY OF SYSTEMIC CHANGE	127
SCALING THE BELIEF FRAMEWORK	128
PARTNERING WITH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES: EXPANDING HER SUPPORT NETWORK	129
BUILDING A CULTURE OF COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY	130
A VISION FOR THE FUTURE	131
Conclusion: Transforming Learning for Black Girls	135
THE JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION	135
A CALL TO ACTION	136
Index	139

Acknowledgments



First and foremost, I give all honor and glory to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Without His guidance, strength, and wisdom, this book would not exist. I find my purpose and unwavering belief in this work through Him. Every word I write, every effort to uplift and advocate for Black girls, is an extension of the calling He has placed on my life. Thank You, Lord, for ordering my steps, reminding me that I am never alone, and carrying me through every challenge. May this book reflect Your love for the girls and women who need to know they are seen, valued, and deeply loved.

Writing *Black Girl in the Middle* has been a journey of reflection, healing, and advocacy. This book exists because of the collective efforts of so many who have poured into me, supported me, and inspired me to keep going. It is an offering to those who stand in the middle—navigating expectations, confronting barriers, and daring to create space where none was freely given.

This book would not exist without the researchers, scholars, and advocates whose work illuminated Black girlhood's complexities and strengthened my understanding. In particular, the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality's Initiative on Gender Justice and Opportunity—your research on adultification, discipline disparities, and how Black girls are denied grace and protection has been groundbreaking. Your scholarship affirms what so many of us have long known but struggled to prove. Thank you for your commitment to justice.

To the community leaders, activists, and organizations working to ensure Black girls receive the support, opportunities, and protection they deserve—your labor does not go unnoticed. Because of you, progress continues, and more Black girls thrive unapologetically.

To the educators who create spaces where Black girls feel seen and empowered—you are the heart of this work. I extend my deepest gratitude to Mrs. Ann Marshall and Mrs. Lydia Lane, whose stories are included in this book and who have worked closely with me to support Black girls, including my own. Mrs. Lane, for your intentionality and care in supporting not just the Black girls in your classroom but my daughter as well, thank you. Your impact is immeasurable.

To the teachers at Vine Middle School, where my teaching journey began—we knew the urgency of our work, and we did it. Against every odd, we never let up. We never stopped for our students. We cried, we rejoiced, we endured. We are victorious. You taught me what it means to stand in the gap, fight for equity, and love our students fiercely. Your lessons continue to shape the educator and advocate I am today.

To my mentors, peers, and fellow educators—your guidance and belief in my voice kept me moving forward, even when the work felt daunting.

To Alex Kajitani and Tom Rademacher—outside of my family, you were the first to hear about this book, and from day one, you encouraged me to keep writing, editing, and pushing forward. Your belief in this book before it even existed gave me the confidence to keep going. Tom, I will never forget your words: “Let’s make a book!”

A special thank-you to Megan Bedell and the Corwin team for your commitment to bringing this book to life. Your patience, guidance, and dedication to ensuring this work reaches those who need it most have meant everything.

To my best friend and fellow educator, Charlie Edmonds—you never let me give up on this. Since we were two little Black girls in Jackson, Tennessee, you have been my sounding board, encourager, and sister in this work. Your support and friendship mean everything to me, and I am beyond grateful for the countless ways you have pushed me to keep going.

To my big sisters and mother, Minnie Springfield—you were my first example of resilience and perseverance in a world that did not always make space for Black girls. Watching you navigate spaces that were not always welcoming, yet refusing to shrink, gave me the courage to do the same. Mama, you were my first teacher. The way you poured into your students with love, patience, and unwavering dedication showed me what it truly means to be an educator. You modeled passion, excellence, and care, leaving an indelible mark on me. Thank you all for paving the way, inspiring me, and showing me how to lead—with knowledge and heart. And thank you, Daddy, Odell Springfield, for always seeing the little girl in me, even if the world refused to.

While I have named a few, I have certainly been influenced by many. I wish I could list every name of every person who has offered encouragement, a smile, a hug, or a high five, but those thank-yous would be the length of another book. Please

know that I carry your support with me and am grateful beyond measure.

To the Black girls I have had the honor of teaching, mentoring, and advocating for—thank you for inspiring me, daily, with your brilliance, resilience, laughter, creativity, passion, and courage.

Jericho, my love, my partner, my greatest supporter—thank you for holding me up, believing in me when I doubted myself, and reminding me why this work matters. Your love and encouragement have kept me grounded, and I am endlessly grateful for you.

Madison and Miah, my sweet, brilliant daughters—you are my greatest inspiration. Every word of this book is written with you in mind. You are powerful beyond measure, your voices matter, and you never have to dim your light for anyone. You are the reason I fight, the reason I push forward, and the reason I refuse to settle for a world that does not fully embrace the beauty and brilliance of Black girls.

This book is more than words on a page—it is a love letter, a call to action, and a declaration that Black girls deserve to be seen, heard, protected, and celebrated.

About the Author



Dr. Melody Hawkins is an award-winning educator, author, and visionary leader dedicated to transforming education for students in historically underserved communities. A passionate advocate for equity in urban education, Melody has spent her career ensuring that all students—particularly those from ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds—have access to

inclusive, high-quality learning experiences that prepare them for lifelong success.

A former eighth-grade science teacher, Melody infused her instruction with culturally relevant pedagogy and social-emotional learning, inspiring students to see themselves as scientists, innovators, and changemakers. She later transitioned into educational leadership as a high school administrator, where she continues to champion equitable opportunities for students while mentoring educators in fostering meaningful, identity-affirming learning environments. In addition to her school work, Melody collaborates with community-based organizations, helping them maximize the impact of their programs and initiatives to better serve and empower the youth in their communities.

Melody's journey in education began after earning a bachelor's degree in microbiology from the University of Tennessee. Her commitment to service led her to AmeriCorps, where she worked with the American Red Cross in New Orleans, Louisiana. After a successful career in diagnostic laboratory science, she recognized the urgent need for more representation of scientists of color and pivoted to education—channeling her expertise into science instruction. She earned a master of education in curriculum and instruction, followed by a second master's degree in educational leadership, through a Tennessee Department of Education administrator development program.

She completed her doctorate in organizational innovation at National University.

A nationally recognized leader in education, Melody has served on state- and district-level curriculum teams, assessment committees, and educator fellowships. Her outstanding contributions have earned her numerous accolades, including Knox County Schools Middle School Science Teacher of the Year, and recognition as one of Knoxville's 40 Under 40 Most Influential People. In a moment of national recognition, she was surprised with the 2021 National University Teacher of the Year Award on the *Drew Barrymore Show*, a testament to her impact and dedication as an educator. She has also been honored by the Tennessee General Assembly and the City of Jackson, Tennessee, for her work in education.

Beyond her professional accomplishments, Melody is a devoted wife to Jericho, a fellow University of Tennessee alum, and a proud mother to their two daughters, Madison and Miah. She resides in Tennessee, where she continues to inspire educators, empower students, and support organizations committed to creating lasting, positive change for youth.

Navigating Black Girl in the Middle

DEFINING “BLACK GIRL”

For the purposes of this book, “Black girl” refers to individuals who self-identify as girls and align with the cultural and racial identities tied to the African diaspora. This encompasses a wide spectrum of experiences, skin tones, languages, and cultural traditions. It includes girls with ancestry rooted in Africa, whether they are African American, Afro-Caribbean, African immigrants, or part of multiracial communities who identify with their Black heritage.

It is important to recognize that Black girlhood is not monolithic. While shared experiences of navigating systemic inequities may unite many Black girls, their identities are shaped by a rich diversity of histories, geographies, and family traditions. This book is grounded in honoring this complexity while affirming the shared need for support, representation, and understanding in educational spaces.

IS THIS JUST FOR WHITE EDUCATORS?

Absolutely not. *Black Girl in the Middle* is for all educators, mentors, and supporters of Black girls—regardless of their racial or cultural background. While it is true that white educators may need to confront biases or blind spots when working with Black girls, this book goes beyond merely addressing those gaps. As a Black woman, I have learned so much through the research and findings presented here—concepts and perspectives I had never deeply considered before engaging with this work.

This book is a journey of discovery and reflection for anyone who interacts with Black girls, including Black educators like myself. It challenges us all to see how systemic inequities, implicit biases, and unexamined practices influence our work. By acknowledging these dynamics and leaning into culturally responsive and affirming practices, we can all do better in uplifting the brilliance, creativity, and resilience of Black girls.

WHO SHOULD READ BLACK GIRL IN THE MIDDLE?

This book is for anyone who is committed to creating affirming, inclusive, and equitable spaces for Black girls in middle school. Whether you're a teacher, school administrator, mentor, counselor, parent, or community leader, *Black Girl in the Middle* offers valuable insights and strategies to support Black girls in navigating educational spaces that often fail to fully see and celebrate them.

It's particularly essential for educators and leaders who want to do more than just acknowledge systemic inequities—they want to actively dismantle them. This book is also for those who may already be doing the work but want to deepen their understanding of the unique challenges and strengths of Black girls.

Ultimately, this book is for anyone who believes in the power of education to affirm, empower, and inspire every student to thrive, particularly those who are most often overlooked or misunderstood.

UNDERSTANDING KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

The key terms and concepts listed here are interconnected and reinforce a system where racial and gender biases are perpetuated in subtle but powerful ways, influencing the way students of color, especially Black students, experience education. By understanding and addressing these ideas, educators can begin to break down barriers to equity and create more inclusive, culturally responsive learning environments.

Data sources refer to the various ways in which information is collected and analyzed to understand the experiences of students within the education system. These sources can include standardized test scores, attendance records, behavioral referrals, teacher evaluations, surveys, and qualitative data from student interviews and focus groups. However, when data collection fails to consider systemic biases—such as the impact of race, gender, and adultification bias—the resulting insights can perpetuate inequities rather than address them.¹ For Black girls, understanding which data sources are being used and how they are interpreted is crucial for uncovering hidden disparities in discipline, academic performance, and social-emotional supports.

Race and ethnicity are social constructs used to classify individuals based on perceived physical characteristics (race) and cultural factors such as language, ancestry, and traditions (ethnicity). For Black girls, their racial and ethnic identities play a significant role in shaping their experiences in predominantly white educational spaces, often leading to stereotyping, implicit bias, and systemic inequities. Black girls are frequently perceived through deficit lenses, which ignore their resilience, brilliance, and cultural richness.² Acknowledging and affirming the intersection of race and ethnicity is essential for creating spaces where Black girls can thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, and expectations associated with being male, female, or nonbinary. For Black girls, the intersection of their gender and race results in unique challenges that are often overlooked in schools. Misconceptions about Black girls, such as assumptions about their behavior, emotionality, or academic abilities, are rooted in historical stereotypes that continue to shape how they are perceived and treated in the classroom.³ Understanding the intersectionality of gender and race allows educators to see Black girls as multidimensional individuals who deserve respect, encouragement, and equitable opportunities to succeed.

Adultification bias refers to the tendency to perceive Black girls as older, more mature, and less innocent than their white peers of the same age. This bias often leads to harsher discipline, reduced empathy from adults, and higher expectations for behavior that fail to consider the developmental needs of children.⁴ For example, Black girls are disproportionately punished for behaviors that might be seen as playful or age-appropriate in other students. Recognizing and countering adultification bias is critical for ensuring that Black girls receive the care, guidance, and grace they need to grow into their full potential.

Microaggressions are subtle, often unintentional, verbal or behavioral slights that communicate discriminatory or prejudiced messages, particularly against marginalized groups. In the classroom, microaggressions can take the form of seemingly innocent comments or actions that reinforce stereotypes, such as assuming a student's intelligence based on their race or making generalized statements about cultural behaviors. These small but impactful moments accumulate over time, leading to negative consequences for students' sense of belonging and self-worth.

Cultural assimilation refers to the process by which students are expected to abandon or suppress their cultural identities in favor of adopting mainstream (often white) cultural norms and practices. In schools, this can be reflected in behaviors, such as expecting students to conform to Eurocentric ideas of appropriate behavior, communication, and even modes of learning. This practice overlooks the richness and validity of diverse cultural backgrounds, creating environments where students must “fit in” at the expense of their authentic selves.

Colorblindness in education refers to the practice of ignoring or downplaying the significance of race and ethnicity in the classroom. When educators claim to be “colorblind,” they may believe they are treating all students equally, but in reality, they may be overlooking the unique experiences and needs of students from different racial or ethnic backgrounds. This approach can prevent educators from acknowledging the impact of systemic racism and inequality, making it harder to address the specific challenges faced by students of color.

Ethnic-racial identity refers to the way individuals understand and define themselves in relation to their ethnic and racial backgrounds. This process of identity formation is influenced by both internal factors (such as personal experiences and beliefs) and external factors (such as societal attitudes and biases). For Black girls, the intersection of race and gender can create a unique and often challenging path in developing their identity in a society that holds conflicting expectations about who they should be.

The belief gap refers to the phenomenon in which some educators lack belief in the potential of students from low-income backgrounds and students of color, often driven by negative stereotypes that go unchallenged within schools. This lack of belief can contribute to systemic inequities and perpetuate low expectations, limiting opportunities and outcomes for these students. This can show up in a variety of ways, including lowering academic standards for students of color, offering less assistance and support, and not pushing them as hard in the classroom. The belief gap also extends to society at large, where there is often a reluctance to invest in educational resources and teachers for these students.

The deficit mindset focuses on what students lack or the problems they face. It tends to highlight weaknesses, gaps in skills, and deficits in students’ knowledge or behavior,

often viewing students in a one-dimensional way. This perspective emphasizes what students cannot do rather than what they can do, leading to low expectations. In a classroom with a deficit mindset, a teacher might view a student struggling with reading as “lazy” or “not capable,” focusing only on remedial interventions to “fix” the student. This approach risks reinforcing stereotypes or biases, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds, and can limit opportunities for growth.

The strengths-based mindset emphasizes students’ existing strengths, abilities, and potential. It focuses on what students can do and how these strengths can be leveraged to overcome challenges. This perspective promotes a more holistic view of students, recognizing that everyone has unique qualities and capacities for growth. A teacher using a strengths-based approach might identify a student’s creativity or problem-solving skills, building assignments that allow the student to apply these strengths while also improving their reading. This mindset fosters a positive, growth-oriented environment, increases student engagement, and empowers students to take ownership of their learning.

Culturally responsive teaching, not to be confused with critical race theory, is a well-researched and evolving field that focuses on integrating students’ cultural backgrounds into teaching practices to create more inclusive, equitable, and empowering learning environments. Culturally responsive teaching emphasizes recognizing and valuing the diverse identities and experiences that students bring to the classroom, adapting curricula, teaching methods, and assessments to reflect and affirm these identities while promoting academic success and social justice.

Here is a list of some foundational books and research studies that have significantly contributed to the development and understanding of culturally responsive teaching:

- Aronson, B., & Laughter, J. (2016). The theory and practice of culturally relevant education: A synthesis of research across content areas. *Review of Educational Research*, 86(1).
- Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.
- Gay, G. (2002). Preparing for culturally responsive teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 53(2).
- Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally responsive teaching and the brain: Promoting authentic engagement and rigor among culturally and linguistically diverse students*. Corwin.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). Toward a theory of culturally relevant pedagogy. *American Educational Research Journal*, 32(3).

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3).

Paris, D. (2021). Culturally sustaining pedagogies and our futures. *The Educational Forum*, 85(4), 364–376.

Paris, D., & Alim, S. H. (2014). What are we seeking to sustain through culturally sustaining pedagogy? A loving critique forward. *Harvard Educational Review*, 84(1).

Coverage of race, opportunity, and equity is supported in part by a grant from The Wallace Foundation, at www.wallacefoundation.org. Education Week retains sole editorial control over the content of this coverage.

A version of this article appeared in the May 11, 2022, edition of Education Week titled “What Is Culturally Responsive Teaching?”

NOTES

1. Muhammad, G. (2020). *Cultivating genius: An equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy*. Scholastic.
2. Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment*. Routledge.
3. Murray, P. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality. Retrieved July 1, 2022, from <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>
4. Murray (2017).

Introduction

WHY IS SHE SITTING ALONE?

I was in preschool the first time I realized I was being treated differently from other kids around me. Preschool—which would mean I was approaching five years old. My earliest memory of preschool involves being dropped at a building that felt dark and lonely, despite it likely being adorned with the abstract artwork of toddlers discovering the expressions of art, letter making, and number recognition.

I do not remember the colors, the crafts, or the classroom displays, but I remember how I felt. I felt scared. I felt different. The kind of difference that made me feel as if I did not belong. I was shy and quiet and wanted to play with other kids, but I never felt like they wanted to play with me. I vividly remember my mother picking me up from school one day and asking the teacher why I was always sitting alone. I do not remember the teacher's answer, but my mother's response is clear: "Please gather Melody's things. We will not be returning after today."

My mother, a teacher, has always had a way of making people feel her words. She is small, but her words can make any giant feel tiny. Whatever the teacher said, my mother did not find it an acceptable answer. I can narrowly recall that day as a four-year-old, having placed that memory away into a special corner of my brain. The memory resurfaced when I had my first daughter, Madison. My husband, Jericho, and I were beginning the search for a preschool for her, and, like many parents, we wanted to ensure she would be in a safe and loving space. I also felt intensely passionate about Madison being in a space that honored her as a little Black girl. This meant a space where she would never feel isolated or out of place, even if she was the only Black girl in the room.

As my own experiences began to shine through the deepest parts of my memory, I wanted to make sure Madison never felt alone and that she could show up as her beautiful brown self with beads and braids. Recalling what the four-year-old version of me remembered, I asked my mother more about that day at "that" preschool. Although a distant memory for both of us, she

could still remember clearly what the teacher said to her when my mother asked, “Why is Melody always sitting alone?” The teacher’s response was “Because she wants to. She never wants to play with the other kids.” As an educator, my mother quickly realized the problem with this statement. The problem reveals a lack of concern for a child’s social and emotional development. Although preschool is most widely known for developing academic agility and social skills, it was not a priority to this preschool teacher, seeing that there was no urgency to encourage this little girl (me) to interact with her peers.

Whenever I have shared this story with my colleagues or friends, they always ask, “Were you the only Black girl in the preschool?” And, yes, yes, I was. In fact, I was the only Black person in the building. It is a critical point within the context of this memory. Maybe my preschool teacher thought I was “okay,” not playing with others. She may have even thought that it was okay for me to make my own choices and that I was *choosing* to be alone daily, with little to no interaction with other students my age. Or is it possible that the preschool teacher simply did not feel that I needed the same interactions and nurturing as other students, which is the thinking that is consistent with a historic construct about Black girls?

These were all of my thoughts as my husband and I were choosing a place for Madison to begin her learning journey. It might be difficult to imagine an adult would think a child needs less nurturing, less care, and less social development, but this is precisely the thinking about Black girls. Research studies show that Black girls are regularly treated as if they are adults. A 2017 study titled *Girlhood Interrupted* by Georgetown Law’s Center on Poverty and Inequality shows that adults tend to view Black girls between the ages of 5 and 19 as more adult than their white counterparts.¹ The study also found that adults viewed five-year-old Black girls as behaving older than their age, more aware of adult topics, and more likely to take on adult responsibilities than expected for their age. As the only Black person and the only Black female student, I was likely exposed to some of these thoughts. These thoughts would directly influence how I was treated in my preschool environment and impact my sense of belonging among the other students. Remember me stating that I felt like I was being treated differently? Even as a young child, I could feel it.

My mother swiftly moved me to a well-known community preschool in east Jackson, Tennessee. In this place, I was not the only Black girl; I was not the only Black person. My teachers were all Black women. They were firm but affirming. I was able

to flourish and fly to kindergarten thanks to their support. Now, even beyond the obvious point of not being the only Black girl in the preschool class, what made my new preschool different from my previous preschool was how the adults connected with me as a little Black girl. I never felt alone or isolated. My days were filled with freedom, fun, structure, expectations, and belonging. I felt like I belonged. Perhaps the adults knew how to create this space for me because they were Black women. Yes, this point is true. But what about the next Black girl who would attend my previous preschool? Does she not also deserve to feel like she belongs? The feeling of “belonging” can do wonders for a young student’s academic and social-emotional development as it is positively associated with success. It is not simply a nice-to-have; it is a foundational element for young students’ success. Research demonstrates that when students feel a strong sense of belonging in school, they are more likely to engage in learning, build resilience, and perform better academically.² This connection fosters intrinsic motivation and supports healthy self-concept development, which are critical for both academic achievement and social-emotional well-being.³

Moreover, belonging enhances students’ ability to form meaningful relationships and navigate challenges, leading to increased motivation and a deeper commitment to learning.⁴ For Black girls, who may face unique challenges in predominantly white educational spaces, intentional efforts by educators to create inclusive environments can close equity gaps and ensure they feel valued and supported.⁵

This means it is critically important that all adults who work with Black girls in an educational setting recognize how important it is to create belonging for young Black girls.

Despite my preschool experience as a young student, I can remember having an optimistic view of my educational future. My mother, currently a retired educator, kept me inspired and focused on a successful journey through education. I was an overachieving honor student who always sought ways to deepen my understanding and learn more. Although I had a positive mindset about my education, I did not always have positive experiences in school.

As a Black girl in elementary school, I was often among the few students of color in my honors classes. By the time I reached middle school age, I noticed a systemic separation among my peers. Students of lower socioeconomic status and students of color were less represented in conversations about high academic achievement and advanced academic classes. I knew

then that this was not acceptable. However, I was unsure if anyone else noticed or even cared. As I progressed through my college journey, the representation of students from low socioeconomic levels was not as noticeable. The lack of Black persons represented in higher education was still a recognizable problem. By this time, I knew that the leaders in charge of supporting schools were paying attention to this lack of representation, but I could not help feeling uneasy about how they were going about fixing it. Some of the efforts seemed to only scratch the surface, as if they were just checking boxes instead of digging deeper to figure out the real problem. For example, there were programs to bring in more diverse faces, but no one seemed to be asking, “What happens after that?” Were these individuals being set up to thrive, or were they just being added to a system that was not designed with them in mind?

It also felt like these ideas were not being carried out consistently, so whatever progress was made seemed patchy at best. And in some cases, the plans themselves felt flawed—plans such as offering training that focused on cultural awareness but stopped short of showing people how to use those lessons to make classrooms or leadership spaces more inclusive. To me, it was not just about fixing numbers; it was about creating spaces where people from marginalized groups felt like they belonged and could succeed. At that point, I was not seeing enough of that.

From as far back as 1799, when John Chavis, a Presbyterian minister and teacher, was the first Black person on record to attend an American college or university, Black persons’ access to higher education had been an elephant in any room about postsecondary attainments.⁶ After nearly 200 years of occasional individual cases of Black individuals being granted access to higher education institutions, U.S. colleges and universities finally began moving to more pointed efforts to ensure equitable access to higher education. Following a 1992 Supreme Court ruling in *United States v. Fordice* that ordered 19 states to take immediate action to desegregate their public higher education systems, various initiatives were implemented to boost Black student enrollment in the United States, especially at state-funded universities and predominantly white institutions (PWIs). These initiatives included outreach programs targeting high schools with significant Black populations, scholarship opportunities specifically for Black students, race-sensitive considerations in admissions policies, and establishing cultural centers or affinity groups on campuses, such as Minority Enhancement for the University of Tennessee, an initiative formed to promote the diversity advantage of the University of Tennessee.⁷ While these efforts initially led to an increase

in enrollment, they often fell short in retaining Black students due to a lack of understanding of the importance of inclusion, anti-bias practices, and cultural belonging. As a Black college student at a PWI, I experienced and witnessed Black students face challenges such as feelings of isolation, lack of support networks, and encounters with racial discrimination on campus, which distracted us from academic success and sometimes led to higher dropout rates. What I quickly realized while a college student was that institutions that do not address the systemic barriers that Black students face once enrolled are likely to perpetuate inequity and limit success. Without adequate support systems and a sense of belonging, many Black students struggled to persist and graduate from college. These truths impacted me and fueled my desire to stay focused on dismantling these barriers for the next generation of Black students.

When I decided to become an educator in an urban setting, I knew I wanted to do my part to increase Black student representation in higher education. I also aimed to ensure that I supported all students from low socioeconomic environments in achieving postsecondary success, whether in college or a career. Without surprise, I am passionate about the academic growth and achievement of Black students, particularly those students who live in historically underserved communities in the United States.

As an educator in an urban setting, I have witnessed most students experience disparities in access to this high-quality education. Because of this, I have had to teach with a great purpose and vision, birthed from my belief in the students I serve. My vision is that I will provide daily instruction that allows students to identify their strengths as learners, collaborate, and solve problems so that students, particularly Black students, will receive access to high-quality, equitable education that allows them to make positive contributions to their community. I developed this vision at the end of my first year in the classroom. That is why I show up every day for my students. My vision is what keeps me persistently providing my students with high-quality instruction. Every opportunity to speak to my students is anchored with this vision. Academic conversations are infused with social-emotional skills, and everyday life conversations are infused with academic content. My vision has become the foundation of who I am as an educator.

I am always peeling back the layers of what this vision means and how it looks in practice and action. With each new school year also comes the need to reexamine my students' experiences in school and their experiences in the

greater community. I must become familiar with my students' perspectives to fully commit to working toward my vision. Of all the different perspectives our students bring to the classroom, the perspective of a Black girl in academic settings has always stood out to me. As an educator, I continue to see inequities in the treatment of Black girls in education, and as a Black woman, I have experienced these firsthand. I do not teach or lead from a place of lack. So often, while I am in the zone of teaching, instructing, facilitating, supporting, and working with my students to build their academic and social-emotional character, I do not think about what I lacked as a student. I instead focus on what I know my students need at that very moment. And that is where knowing their perspectives comes into practice. My students may approach a challenging task partly because of what they have previously experienced regarding challenges. The way my students may approach a challenging task, which might include trepidation or doubt, is influenced by their past experiences. This suggests that prior encounters with similar challenges, whether successful or not, shape their confidence levels and strategies for tackling new obstacles. For instance, a student who struggled with math in elementary school may approach a complex algebra problem with hesitation, drawing upon memories of previous difficulties, while another student who excelled in science competitions may tackle the same problem with greater confidence, buoyed by past successes. By recognizing the unique experiences and challenges Black girls face in academic settings, I can create a classroom environment that supports their individual needs and fosters their growth and success.

The importance of understanding a student's perspective hit me when a student abruptly interrupted my lesson on the Galaxy movement. She stated, "Ms. Hawkins, I can't believe you're my teacher." I was standing at the whiteboard illustrating the evidence connected to the movement of galaxies in our universe, but her statement stopped my hand from moving. With awe and passion, she continued, "Like, you're a Black woman teaching me science. And you know what you're talking about. That's so cool. I usually see white people talking about science." I paused, looked at my beautiful Black student with the same awe she gave me, and told her, "That's right. And you are a Black girl who understands what I'm talking about. That's even cooler." I left the building that day and have never let that moment slip from my memory. She was an eighth-grade girl experiencing an empowering moment in her academic journey simply by seeing herself reflected in her Black woman science teacher.

I could be wrong in assuming that she had not seen herself reflected in her previous teachers, but the staggeringly low percentage of Black teachers in the United States would say that she likely had not. Although research supports the positive impact of Black educators on student achievement and social-emotional growth, with only 7% of the teacher workforce in the United States identifying as a Black educator, perhaps this is one reason racial disparities in academic achievement continue to exist.⁸ Not only do Black educators increase the probability of achievement for Black students, but Black educators also allow all students to experience racial and cultural diversity in preparation for a diverse world. Black students want and need to see Black educators in their classrooms. All students can benefit from being taught by a Black educator as this prepares them for a diverse workforce. In a thought-provoking article by the American Economic Association in 2023, a professor and authority in education and labor economics, Seth Gershenson, shared an insightful perspective.⁹ He stated, “White students benefit as well from being exposed to a diverse and representative teaching force; . . . having a teacher of color can shift their worldview and sense of who can do what. It can shape their racial attitudes in a beneficial and prosocial way.” Gershenson’s words underscore the profound influence that a diverse teaching faculty, particularly Black educators, can have on shaping not only students’ academic experiences but also their broader outlook and attitudes toward race.

In my heart, I always felt that having a Black educator was a treasure, and as a scientist, I have spent the last 10 years reading the data that support this. Data such as higher graduation rates for Black students, increased achievement scores, lower suspension rates, and higher interest in college have all been linked to a Black teacher’s presence as the classroom teacher. A 2019 Brookings Institution article by Andre Perry highlights the positive impact of having Black teachers in the classroom, emphasizing several key points. First, it suggests that Black students who have had at least one Black teacher are more likely to graduate high school and aspire to attend college.¹⁰ Additionally, exposure to Black teachers correlates with higher college attendance rates among Black students. Furthermore, the presence of Black teachers has been linked to reduced dropout rates for Black students and increased likelihood of pursuing postsecondary education.

Black educators make a difference by showing up as our authentic selves. I am a Black woman, full of pride, with a love for science and a passion for seeing young people become their best selves. I am also a demanding nurturer, striving not only

to challenge my students academically but also to cultivate an environment where they feel valued, supported, and empowered to reach their full potential. While drawing inspiration from Rita Pierson's concept of the warm demander, I extend this notion further by emphasizing the importance of nurturing students' emotional well-being, fostering their personal growth, and instilling in them a deep sense of self-confidence and resilience. As a warm demander, I believe in fostering not just academic excellence but also the holistic development of each student, recognizing that their success extends beyond the classroom and into their lives. I show up as all of those things without apology. I know that my students are watching my every move, and I take responsibility with the utmost importance to demonstrate a character they can draw from in pursuit of who they are in this world. Now, as we drift back to my awe-stricken student, consider her perspective while watching her Black female science teacher—a mirror of her future, perhaps—a mirror that she might never have seen in her classroom before.

In addition to the likely low chance that my student had more Black teachers other than me, I can even take a wild guess and assume that she may not have experienced positive, safe spaces cultivated with Black girls in mind during her time in school.

My firsthand knowledge as a Black girl in an academic setting can support this theory. However, to truly grasp the extent of these issues, we must turn to the groundbreaking research project “Listening to Black Women and Girls: Lived Experiences of Adultification Bias.”¹¹ This study serves as a continuation of the *Girlhood Interrupted* report released by the Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality in 2017. The project illuminates the pervasive nature of Black women and girls' treatment in our society through rigorous qualitative methods like interviews and focus groups. This experience may not be as obvious without peeling back the undertones of statements commonly made.

The findings from this report, accompanied by the poignant voices of Black women and girls, paint a stark picture of the injustices they face. Participants across various age groups share their experiences, highlighting the denial of their childhood innocence and the imposition of premature expectations. As one participant in the 30- to 39-year age group poignantly expresses, “[T]here’s, like, this non-acceptance of being a child.”¹² Younger participants echo this sentiment, describing how they are held to adult-like standards from a young age, facing severe consequences for ordinary childhood mistakes.

Moreover, the study reveals how deeply ingrained stereotypes like the “angry Black woman” narrative shape perceptions and interactions. Participants recount instances of being labeled as insubordinate or having attitude problems simply for expressing themselves. This unfair treatment extends to disciplinary actions, often resulting in punitive measures rather than support and guidance.

The hyper-sexualization of Black girls is also a prevalent theme in their narratives. The study recounts instances where their clothing choices are misconstrued, and their innocence is questioned. Additionally, societal expectations of white norm femininity stifle their voices and invalidate their experiences. As one participant aptly says, “They just wanna shut us off. They just want us to be—be quiet . . . whenever we start to talk, nothing’s happening.”

These reflections shed light on the intersectional nature of adultification bias, which is compounded by factors such as race, age, socioeconomic status, and gender. As another participant poignantly notes, “Black girls in poor families do have to grow up. It’s about socioeconomics, too. It’s not just about . . . being Black.” And, as if it was my voice captured in this report, a participant from the 18- to 29-year age group stated, “At the preschool point is where teachers are starting to feel like . . . ‘Black girls are a little too sassy.’” These insights appear in multiple societal locations, particularly in the criminal legal system and education. In the education system, adultification bias against Black girls leads to less opportunity for Black girls to be in class learning with their peers and, therefore, lower academic achievement rates. There is clearly an urgent need for systemic change to dismantle the structures that perpetuate negative experiences and ensure that Black women and girls are afforded the dignity, respect, and opportunities they rightfully deserve.

After my student’s statement, I drove home thinking more about my vision for my students and why I teach. My aim is to provide academic experiences where my students can learn to become positive contributors to the community. To provide experiences for our students to grow and thrive, we must understand our students’ perspectives. My student’s perspective was that she had disproportionately learned science content from white teachers. Her perspective lacked the presence of racial representation that was similar to her own. Due to the implicit biases of her teachers, her perspective potentially lacked opportunities to feel a sense of belonging in her academic spaces. These are things I had to understand about my student’s academic experiences. I can still recall when a Black woman, a mentor, told me I would have “two strikes against me.” I was a sixth-grade

middle school student. The two strikes she referred to were my race and my gender. At the intersection of racism and sexism, there stands a Black girl.

Why shouldn't we explore how to create supportive spaces in academic settings for Black girls? If we truly believe that all students deserve fair and appropriate public education, we must consider how Black girls are forced to exist in the middle of racism and sexism and how this shows up in their schools and classrooms.

WHY FOCUS ON MIDDLE SCHOOL YEARS?

When I first received the vision for *Black Girl in the Middle*, it immediately felt like more than a book. It began to take on a form in my mind that resembled a pedagogical movement for middle school educators. As an educator who has worked with students between the ages of 10 and 18, as a mom of my own two Black girls, and as a Black woman, I have noticed that the middle school years, typically between ages 10 and 14, are very critical in the academic, social, and emotional success of Black girls.

These years are a formative period when identity, self-esteem, and academic confidence take shape, and it's also when young Black girls begin to grapple more deeply with what it means to be Black—and specifically, a Black girl—in the United States. Research supports how pivotal this age range is: adolescence marks a period of heightened vulnerability to social pressures and stereotypes that can significantly impact both academic motivation and self-perception.¹³ I have seen this with my adolescent girls and can vividly remember these feelings as an adolescent. At the same time, supportive environments that emphasize positive racial and gender identity can foster resilience and a stronger sense of self-worth.¹⁴

The pressure Black girls face is unique; during these years, they are often perceived as more mature than their peers—a phenomenon known as “adultification”—which can lead to higher disciplinary rates, diminished emotional support, and fewer chances to fully experience childhood.¹⁵ Such experiences, left unaddressed, can hinder their academic engagement and social-emotional development. Yet, with intentional guidance, these years hold the potential to shape Black girls into empowered young women who see their identities as strengths rather than limitations.

Black Girl in the Middle seeks to be part of that journey, helping to create environments where Black girls feel seen, heard, and celebrated in the ways they need most during these critical middle school years.

My goal in writing this book is not to simplify the experiences of Black girls into a monolithic category, nor is it intended to single out the experiences of Black girls in school as the only group with a harsher experience. Instead, I write this book to ensure that all persons privileged with the opportunity to support Black girls in their academic journey will have strategies for creating an inclusive, nurturing, supportive environment where our girls can experience limitless success. I also hope that educators will have a deepened perspective about the circumstances Black girls are faced with, in hopes that educators will work to transform these experiences. The reality is that public education, at its first inception, was not created with Black girls in mind. The reality is harsh but true. But “we are here, and we are not leaving,” says the Black girl in me. So instead of trying to fit the unlimited potential of Black girls into a square that was not designed for them, perhaps it is time that we remove the boundaries of the square (and here “the square” refers to the historic and, at times, antiquated structure of public education) and focus on creating an experience that our Black girls can feel more comfortable in and thrive.

FIVE PRACTICES FOR ENHANCING LEARNING FOR BLACK GIRLS

The five practices that I have detailed in this book are based on my experiences of teaching young Black girls, the efforts of my colleagues, and the research that exists in support of improving academic spaces for Black girls. When I reflect on my opportunities to support my Black girl students, these practices are the ones that I can vividly remember making a positive impact on the interaction and thus catapulting my students toward more confidence and greater success. These are the practices that I have witnessed my colleagues implement with an unyielding effort. These are the practices that—as you’ll see in future chapters—research sustains with documented influence. I introduce these practices now as questions and will explain them in greater detail in the coming chapters. Allow the questions to ring in your mind. Think back on every encounter you have had with your Black girl students. Return to a moment when you were delivering a lesson, walking down the hallway, passing through the cafeteria, approaching the tutoring table, or standing at your morning or afternoon spot as the hallways,

doorways, and sidewalks filled with students. See the faces of the Black girls as I ask these questions:

- **Practice 1—Identify Your Beliefs:** What do you believe about the social-emotional and academic presence of Black girls? How do your actions communicate this belief?
- **Practice 2—Plant the SEAD:** How do you support the social-emotional and academic growth of Black girls? Are your actions *intentional* in fostering both their emotional well-being and academic success?
- **Practice 3—Listen With Compassion:** How do you demonstrate compassionate listening? Are you listening to what they say, how they say, and what they really are communicating to you?
- **Practice 4—Encourage Positive Self-Talk:** When and how do you encourage positive self-talk? Are you intentional about encouraging self-affirming thoughts and fostering their sense of worth?
- **Practice 5—Advocate for Their Girlhood:** How do you respond to Black girls academically and socially? Do you engage with Black girls in age-appropriate ways, honoring their developmental stage and individuality?

Maybe you think of questions like these regarding all of your students. That's great. But guess what's more remarkable—pausing and thinking of these questions specifically for Black girls who may not have had these questions considered within the context of their educational existence in the United States. If there is any uncertainty about your answers to any of these questions as they pertain to Black girl students, then now is the moment to reflect and identify how these are embedded in your everyday interactions. It is a great moment to point out that these are “practices,” not “steps,” meaning that any thoughts can be implemented at any time but must be consistently implemented. Although these practices are not prescriptive, nor intended to be a “take a pill; make it better” kind of mindset, they must become a way of life in the classroom, intentionally focused on Black girls. If done frequently, I believe these practices will change the experience for our Black girls and certainly positively impact all Black students and students of color. That would be a well-deserved outcome for students of color. Suffice it to say, it is past the time that we focus on the student group forced to thrive in the middle of racism and sexism, our Black girls.

USING THIS BOOK

GUIDING THE JOURNEY TO REFLECT, BUILD, AND ADVOCATE

The division of this book into **Reflect**, **Build**, and **Advocate** mirrors the journey that every educator is invited to take—a journey that begins with introspection, moves through purposeful action, and culminates in meaningful advocacy. Just as I was able to sense, even as a young child, the subtle shifts and quiet signals that told me I was being treated differently, Black girls sense and interpret the attitudes, actions, and support (or lack thereof) they receive from the adults around them. They navigate classrooms and learning spaces that can feel dark and isolating or, with intention, vibrant and empowering. This division of the book is a response to that reality, providing a pathway for educators to recognize, understand, and dismantle the barriers that may prevent Black girls from feeling fully welcomed in academic spaces.

Each section goes beyond simply offering information; it equips you with practical strategies and actionable steps. **Part 1: Reflect on Beliefs and Biases** encourages you to examine your own beliefs and biases, challenging you to look inward, but it also provides tools for confronting and reshaping those beliefs to better serve your students. Chapter 1, “It’s Not My Fault; It Is My Problem,” tackles the deep-rooted issues Black girls face in the education system and the historical context that has shaped these challenges. Here, you’ll be encouraged to take ownership of the impact you have and to recognize how your beliefs shape students’ lives. Chapter 2, “Practice One—Identify Your Beliefs” explores stereotypes and invites you to examine any unconscious biases you may hold. Here, you’ll find tools to confront and dismantle stereotypes, learning to value each student’s unique strengths and identities.

In **Part 2: Build Compassionate and Supportive Connections**, the focus shifts to creating a foundation of trust and empathy. You’ll not only be guided to form compassionate, genuine connections, but you’ll also receive hands-on approaches for creating a classroom that feels safe, inclusive, and affirming. Chapter 3, “Practice Two—Plant the SEAD,” presents strategies for fostering an inclusive classroom, with specific approaches for addressing social-emotional-academic development. The goal here is to make sure each student feels they belong in a safe and supportive learning environment. Moving forward, Chapter 4, “Practice Three—Listen With Compassion,” teaches

you the art of compassionate listening, guiding you in understanding Black girls as whole individuals. This chapter includes exercises that foster genuine empathy, encouraging you to take a deeper interest in each student's background, challenges, and dreams.

In **Part 3: Advocate for Her Development and Childhood**, you'll learn how to empower and advocate for Black girls. You're given ways to put this deeper understanding into action—actively championing the unique needs and rights of Black girls, preserving their girlhood, fostering their self-assurance, and ensuring they feel seen and valued. Chapter 5, “Practice Four—Encourage Positive Self-Talk,” focuses on building confidence, self-advocacy, and leadership skills, helping each girl learn to express herself with conviction. This chapter provides practical ways to nurture self-worth, allowing students to see themselves as capable leaders. Chapter 6, “Practice Five—Advocate for Their Girlhood,” addresses the adultification of Black girls and the pressure to “know better.” You'll find insights into respecting and preserving their girlhood, encouraging you to create a classroom that honors their journey. Chapter 7, “Partnering With Families and Communities,” expands the conversation to include families and community figures, teaching you how to cultivate a broad support network through culturally relevant engagement and mentorship.

Finally, in the Conclusion, “Transforming Learning for Black Girls,” you'll reflect on the journey, revisit key themes, and learn how to embed these practices into school culture as lasting change. The closing chapter offers tools for ongoing assessment, encouraging you to implement and revisit these practices to sustain a supportive environment for Black girls.

At the end of each chapter, you'll find a reflection section titled “**In the Middle**.” This is more than a title—it signifies a commitment to centering Black girls' experiences. “**In the Middle**” invites you to examine your practices, challenge biases, and focus on the voices and needs of Black girls. Through this process, you'll engage deeply with the historical and present-day realities shaping their educational journeys and take intentional steps toward creating environments where they can thrive.

Let each reflection be a moment of **reckoning, learning, and taking action** as you navigate this journey. Stay “in the middle” to place Black girls' strengths, needs, and aspirations at the heart of your work, ensuring that your classroom becomes a space of growth and belonging.

THE BELIEF FRAMEWORK

As you read this book, you will likely develop many ideas for supporting Black girls in your educational setting. One powerful tool to help you turn these ideas into meaningful action is the BELIEF framework. The BELIEF framework can be used strategically to implement and measure specific practices, allowing you to track their impact on the learning environment, particularly for Black girls.

The framework is most effective when used on a larger scale—across multiple classrooms, schools, or within an organization—allowing for consistent implementation and evaluation. By using BELIEF, you can ensure that your practices are aligned with your goals for equity and student success, while also tracking progress over time to see what works and where adjustments may be needed.

With this framework, you'll be able to define your goals, apply evidence-based practices, and measure their impact in a structured way. This allows for a focused, collective effort to create a learning environment that is truly supportive and transformative for Black girls, fostering an atmosphere of success and growth.

The BELIEF framework is designed to guide educators and organizations through a process of intentional practice and reflection. The Conclusion provides more detail about this framework, but, for now, here's an overview of each part of the framework:

B – Begin With Belief

Start by cultivating a deep, unwavering belief in the potential of Black girls. This belief forms the foundation for all your practices, so you will also need to take time to re-familiarize yourself about who you believe you are in their lives. Do you believe that you are a change agent? Approach every interaction, decision, and initiative with the understanding that Black girls have the ability to succeed and thrive in any learning environment. This belief sets the tone for the work ahead and shapes the way you engage with students.

E – Envision Their Futures

Imagine the possibilities for Black girls and the futures you want them to have. Create a clear vision of success that includes academic achievement, personal growth, and social-emotional well-being. This vision will guide

your efforts and help you maintain focus on the long-term goals. Envisioning their futures helps to build a sense of purpose and direction, ensuring that all actions align with the ultimate goal of student success.

L – Leverage Data

To effectively support Black girls, educators must make data-driven decisions. This involves reviewing a variety of relevant data, including academic performance, discipline records, attendance, and observational data. Additionally, it is crucial to gather anecdotal data directly from Black girls, listening to their experiences and understanding their most pressing needs. By analyzing these data, you can identify patterns, uncover barriers to success, and tailor their practices to address specific challenges. Leveraging data ensures that decisions are grounded in reality and that interventions are responsive and targeted to the unique needs of Black girls.

I – Implement Your Practices

Once your beliefs and vision are set and you understand the needs, gaps, and opportunities, it's time to implement your practices. This step is about turning your ideas into action. Whether it's through culturally responsive teaching, mentoring programs, affinity groups, or inclusive classroom practices, consistency in implementation is necessary. Ensure that these practices are applied equitably and effectively, creating an environment where Black girls feel supported and empowered to succeed.

E – Evaluate Your Efforts

Evaluation is essential for understanding the effectiveness of your practices. Collect and analyze both qualitative and quantitative data on how well the implemented strategies are meeting your goals. Regular evaluation allows you to make data-informed decisions, identify areas for improvement, and ensure that your practices are having a positive impact on the learning environment for Black girls.

F – Fortify Your Approaches

The final step is about sustaining and strengthening your practices over time. Use the insights gained from evaluation to refine and improve your approaches. This is an ongoing process that requires flexibility and adaptability, ensuring that your practices continue to meet the needs of Black girls as they evolve. Fortifying

your approaches involves building a culture of continuous improvement, where both educators and students are supported in their growth and success.

Take your time with each chapter, reflecting as you go, and remember that this book is a tool—a means to better serve, understand, and advocate for each Black girl who steps into your learning space and classroom.

NOTES

1. Murray, P. (2017). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality. <https://genderjusticeandopportunity.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/girlhood-interrupted.pdf>
2. Goodenow, C. (1993). Classroom belonging among early adolescent students: Relationships to motivation and achievement. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 13(1), 21–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0272431693013001002>
3. Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *The American Psychologist*, 55, 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
4. Osterman, K. F. (2000). Students' need for belonging in the school community. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(3), 323–367. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1170786>
5. Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2011). A brief social-belonging intervention improves academic and health outcomes of minority students. *Science*, 331(6023), 1447–1451. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1198364>
6. Major landmarks in the progress of African Americans in higher education. (n.d.). *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*. Retrieved April 22, 2025, from <https://jbhe.com/chronology/>
7. Creekmore, B. B. (2018, October 9). Me4ut (Minority enrichment for the University of Tennessee). *Volopedia*. <https://volopedia.lib.utk.edu/entries/me4ut-minority-enrichment-for-the-university-of-tennessee/>
8. Carr, S. (2022, January 5). Why we could soon lose even more Black teachers. *The Hechinger Report*. <https://hechingerreport.org/why-we-could-soon-lose-even-more-black-teachers/>
9. Smith, T. (2023, January 10). *Teacher diversity in the classroom: Does exposure to same-race teachers help students in the long run?* American Economic Association. <https://www.aeaweb.org/research/same-race-teachers-long-run>

10. Perry, A. (2019, October 16). *For better student outcomes, hire more Black teachers*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/for-better-student-outcomes-hire-more-black-teachers/>
11. Blake, J. J., & Epstein, R. (2019, May 14). Listening to Black women and girls: Lived experiences of adultification bias. *Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality*.
12. Blake, J. J., & Epstein, R. (2019, May 14). Listening to Black women and girls: Lived experiences of adultification bias. *Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality*.
13. Tatum, B. D. (1997). *"Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" And other conversations about race*. Basic Books.
14. Neblett, E., Rivas-Drake, D., & Umaña-Taylor, A. (2012). The promise of racial and ethnic protective factors in promoting ethnic minority youth development. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6, 295–303.
15. Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017, June 27). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>

PART 1

Reflect on Beliefs and Biases

The journey toward educational equity begins with an honest and often challenging exploration of our own beliefs. **Part 1: Reflect on Beliefs and Biases** invites you to pause and reflect—not to place blame or invoke sympathy but to increase awareness of the ways in which your beliefs, whether conscious or unconscious, shape your classroom practices. Part 1 of this book encourages you to look inward with curiosity and openness, not with guilt or shame. It’s about recognizing that we all carry biases, but more importantly, it’s about taking actionable steps to address them and ensure that Black girls in our classrooms have the opportunities they deserve to thrive.

Chapter 1: “It’s Not My Fault; It Is My Problem” challenges us to understand that, while we may not be directly responsible for the systemic inequities that Black girls face in education, we are still part of the broader educational system that must change. This chapter encourages you to move beyond guilt or defensiveness and instead focus on how you, as an educator, can take responsibility for the impact you have on your students’ experiences. The historical context provided here is meant to increase awareness—not to make you feel overwhelmed but to give you the tools and knowledge necessary to see where change is needed. By owning our role in this process, we become empowered to act, with the recognition that transformation begins within ourselves and our practices.

Chapter 2: “Practice One—Identify Your Beliefs” takes this self-exploration a step further by guiding you to reflect on your own beliefs and biases toward Black girls. This is not about labeling yourself as “good” or “bad.” Instead, this chapter invites you to examine what you might unknowingly believe about Black girls based on societal stereotypes and how these beliefs can influence your classroom. Do you recognize their full potential and their strengths? This practice encourages you to reflect, question, and reframe those beliefs. It’s not about perfection—it’s about awareness and growth. The tools

provided in this chapter will help you challenge any unconscious biases and move toward a deeper, more authentic understanding of each student as an individual. This process doesn't need to feel daunting; it's simply about becoming more aware and taking intentional steps toward better serving all students, particularly Black girls.

Throughout **Part 1**, you will be encouraged to engage in self-reflection with compassion, not judgment. The purpose is not to overwhelm or to assign blame but to foster a deeper understanding of how our beliefs shape the classroom environment. By increasing our awareness, we open the door to meaningful change. Remember, this process is about growth—taking one small step at a time. This section is an invitation to reflect, acknowledge, and move forward with a commitment to doing better. As you work through these chapters, it's important to recognize that this is a journey, not a destination, and the goal is not to be perfect but to be open, aware, and willing to change.

The process of reflection and self-awareness that you'll begin here is not easy, but it is absolutely essential for creating the kind of educational environment that Black girls deserve. The work ahead may feel challenging at times, but it is not about fault; rather, it's about progress. Each step you take toward understanding your beliefs and biases is a step toward creating a classroom where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to reach their fullest potential. **Part 1** will help you lay that foundation, equipping you with the awareness and tools needed to transform your classroom and the lives of your students. The journey may not be simple, but it is a necessary and powerful one.

CHAPTER 1

It's Not My Fault; It Is My Problem

*"Invest in the human soul. Who knows, it
might be a diamond in the rough."*

— Mary McLeod Bethune, educator

BLACK GIRLS' EDUCATIONAL EQUITY

Public education in the United States was not created with Black girls in mind. It was not created with any Black person in mind and certainly not a Black female person. Countless historical records from the 18th century prove this reality. At its inception, public education sought to develop competent citizens capable of maintaining and upholding a democracy that supported the earliest views of the U.S. Founding Fathers. The Founding Fathers believed that "preserving democracy would require an educated population that could understand political and social issues and would participate in civic life, vote wisely, protect their rights and freedoms, and resist tyrants and demagogues."¹ However, in the early days of the United States, education was treated as a privilege deliberately denied to individuals of African descent, reflecting the entrenched anti-Black mindset and exclusionary practices of the time. Restricted by law, enslaved persons of African descent were prohibited from receiving an education. The Georgia slave codes allowed for punishment, at the court's discretion, by fining or whipping an enslaved person if they were found reading, writing, or being taught to read or write.² Louisiana laws criminalized teaching slaves to read or write, punishable by death or a lifetime of hard labor. South Carolinian legislation even outlawed

“mental meetings,” which included reading, writing, arithmetic, and memorization. By the 1830s, all slave states except Maryland, Tennessee, and Kentucky had passed anti-literacy laws that prohibited enslaved persons or freed Black persons from teaching or learning to read or write.³ Slave owners who held enslaved persons against their will shared concerns that literate enslaved persons could forge their travel passes.

Other slave owners feared that information sharing would lead to more slave rebellions. Slave revolts such as the 1739 Stono Rebellion and the 1831 Nat Turner revolt made anti-literacy an urgent implementation for systemic control of enslaved persons. White slave owners felt that Black persons with the ability to read and write could use their skills to create an imbalance in the power structure between master and slave. Literate persons of African descent threatened the way of life that justified slavery. All while the early American economy was being built on the backs of enslaved persons, reading and writing were no priority and had no place in slavery since enslaved persons were not viewed as more than property. However, learning to read and write revealed that this so-called “property” had a mind that challenged the idea that they were less than human. Learning to read and write revealed hope beyond the inhumanity enslaved persons were forced to experience. Literacy meant freedom—intellectual freedom until physical freedom could be realized. Black literacy was a revolutionizing weapon and the ultimate tool for enslaved persons to build, organize, and push toward freedom. This is the very reason white slave owners worked to forbid it.

As explored by Heather A. Williams in *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery*, enslaved persons took on many methods to acquire education, even against the laws governing early U.S. society. Enslaved persons knew the importance of education and valued it with as much worth as life itself. Slave narratives and memoirs have provided us with more insight into the punishments and efforts that white citizens used against Black literacy. Some years after escaping slavery, Gordon Buford, a former slave, recounted how he and other enslaved persons never learned to read because the slave owner threatened to “skin them alive” if they were ever caught doing so. When formerly enslaved Belle Caruthers’s owner caught her reading a dictionary, he struck her down with his muddy boots. Other records recount how enslaved persons watched in horror when enslaved persons were hanged for teaching others to read.⁴

With each new law or punishment against learning, enslaved persons grew increasingly stealthy in spreading the skill of

reading and writing. Black men and women worked together to ensure that literacy within the enslaved community remained a resolute commitment. Williams passionately states, “Understanding how enslaved people learned not only illuminates the importance of literacy as an instrument of resistance and liberation but also brings into view the clandestine tactics and strategies enslaved people employed to gain some control over their own lives.”⁵

Gender-based labor roles significantly shaped the ways in which Black women and girls sought and obtained education during and after slavery. Enslaved Black women were assigned a range of labor roles that placed them in diverse environments—both domestic and agricultural. While many Black men and boys were primarily tasked with fieldwork, Black girls and women often worked in domestic roles within the slave owner’s household, performing tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and caring for children.⁶ This separation of labor, while gendered, meant that Black women and girls had more varied interactions with both enslavers and other enslaved people. For instance, those in domestic roles might have had more direct access to literacy practices, whether by overhearing lessons intended for the slave owner’s children or observing their enslavers engage in reading and writing. In contrast, Black women and girls working in the fields were more likely to engage with communal and oral forms of knowledge, sharing survival strategies, history, and cultural practices through storytelling and conversation.

Williams highlights several accounts of enslaved Black girls and women learning to read from their white owners’ children, who may not have been as knowledgeable about the anti-literacy laws, and accounts of Black women secretly carrying newspapers and books from their white slave owners’ homes to teach themselves and other enslaved persons.

The onset of the Civil War in 1861 only encouraged the desire for Black literacy. Black enslaved persons were learning that the Civil War could end slavery, causing slave masters to grow increasingly nervous about how Black literacy would impact the slavery structures they trusted. The Northern states also held discomfort with Black literacy. When the 1831 Convention of Colored Men of the United States was held in Pennsylvania, its delegates, freed Black men and white abolitionists, proposed forming a college for freed Black men in New Haven, Connecticut. However, this idea was crushed by the white citizens of New Haven, with political leaders believing that a college for the Black population would be “incompatible” with their existence. The mayor of New Haven stated, “We will resist

the establishment of this college in this place by every lawful means.”⁷ In 1833 Connecticut prohibited Black persons who were not inhabitants of the state from attending an abolitionist-run boarding school established in 1832 for free Black girls. The white residents would later burn the building to the ground.

While barriers to Black literacy continued to persist, public education began taking its earliest form in the late 19th century. By 1870, approximately 78% of all children between the ages of 5 and 14 were enrolled in elementary school.⁸ This period also marked a shift in governance, as many states began to incorporate the responsibility for public education into their state constitutions. However, despite this increased emphasis on public education for all U.S. children, Black children were often excluded from these educational opportunities.

Following the abolition of slavery in 1865, Black individuals began to gain the legal right to education, as ratified by the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, which collectively aimed to extend citizenship and civil rights to formerly enslaved people. Despite these constitutional protections, Black children were still subjected to deeply segregated and underfunded schools, with inadequate facilities and resources.⁹ These disparities persisted as Black communities faced significant resistance to integration and equal access to quality education, particularly in the Southern states where Jim Crow laws further institutionalized racial segregation in schools.

Even beyond the unequal access to quality education for Black persons was the unequal access for female students. Once widespread access to public school was gained for both Black girls and Black boys in the mid-19th century, following the end of slavery and the passage of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, Black children were generally allowed access to education. However, girls were sometimes taught a different curriculum and had limited access to higher education.¹⁰ Additionally, social constructs and norms about women’s place in society pushed the importance of education for Black girls to the background. Although Black women and men were philosophically committed to education, entrenched gender roles imposed by society often relegated women to domestic responsibilities, making it harder for them to access education in the same way as men. The expectation that women should prioritize managing the home and raising children created significant barriers to their educational opportunities.

Still, the fight for equality, equity, and improved educational conditions for Black children pushed forward. The overturning of *Plessy v. Ferguson* by the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling

disrupted the idea of separate but equal conditions in American public schools. It led to historic changes in the learning experiences of Black and white students. As schools began desegregating, there were hopes that this new policy would correct the flawed educational system to one that was more equitable and just for Black children. Instead, the unintended consequences of closing Black schools, firing Black teachers, and demoting Black principals created a lack of trust in the intentions and goals of desegregated schools. The post-Civil Rights era of public education continues to find Black children inequitably served and disproportionately impacted.¹¹

According to 2019 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) data, 82% of Black fourth graders scored below proficient in reading, and 87% of eighth graders scored below proficient in math.¹² Although still lower than that of white students, Black student achievement has shown minimal improvement in recent years, partly due to federal initiatives such as No Child Left Behind, Race to the Top, and My Brother's Keeper. The programs have sought to bring more attention and intention toward providing equitable support for Black students. These initiatives have optimistic hopes, and some have shown improvements in historically marginalized subgroups. However, they do not explicitly highlight the complexities associated with the intersectionality of race and gender, uniquely experienced by Black girls. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office's (GAO)'s analysis of the most recent pre-pandemic Department of Education data, Black girls represented 15% of all girls in public schools during the 2017–2018 school year, yet they accounted for a disproportionately high share of school disciplinary measures. Nationally, they made up 45% of out-of-school suspensions, 37% of in-school suspensions, and 43% of expulsions. These punitive actions were frequently issued in response to subjective behaviors such as defiance, disrespect, and disruption—infractions for which Black girls were more harshly disciplined than their white peers across every U.S. state.¹³

There is an oversight of the intricacies that permeate Black girls' place in education. This oversight results from circumstances that first excluded Black persons and then Black girls from educationally centered conversations.

In recounting the history of Black persons' inability to experience the right to education in the United States, it should now be clearer why I say that public education was not created with Black people in mind. At every significant juncture in societal change in the United States, Black persons, especially girls, were excluded, pushed out, turned away, or limited from accessing education. From anti-literacy laws across the Southern states,

restrictive access to education in the Northern states, the underserved conditions created by Jim Crow, and the neglect following the Civil Rights era, education for Black people in the United States has never been a priority. Therefore, it is evident that no systemic intentionality was placed on creating an educational system that truly serves Black people. As Professors Michael J. Dumas and Joseph Derrick Nelson shared in *(Re) Imagining Black Boyhood*, “beginning in slavery, Black boys and girls were imagined as chattel and were often put to work as young as two and three years old. Subject to much of the dehumanization suffered by Black adults, Black children were rarely perceived as worthy of playtime and were severely punished for exhibiting normal child-like behaviors.”¹⁴ Due to generations of racial injustice, we now have a functioning educational construct that seeks to serve all students yet was not created for all students. The only way we can improve such a system is to pick it apart, examine the experiences of every group impacted by this system, and work to intentionally create a system that values, uplifts, and creates belonging for each group. This is why it’s crucial to reframe our thinking about what Black girls need in their educational environments. For individual teachers, this reframing means moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach to recognizing the unique, nuanced needs of Black girls in the classroom. It requires understanding the historical context that shapes their educational experiences and actively working to create an environment where they are not just tolerated but celebrated. Black girls need spaces where their voices are heard, their cultural identities are respected, and their experiences are seen as valuable contributions to the learning community. They also need educators who are aware of and responsive to the impacts of implicit bias and systemic inequities that disproportionately affect them.

Teachers can create this environment by working through the practices referenced in the coming chapters, which involve integrating asset-based beliefs into the learning environment, fostering an atmosphere of respect and compassionate communication, and encouraging inclusive thinking around race, identity, and history. It also means providing opportunities for Black girls to engage in leadership roles, build strong mentorship relationships, and have access to emotional and social support within the school system.

Despite the disparities, Black girls and women persistently pursue spaces historically dominated by men or white women. This pursuit of achievement should come as no surprise. The desire for excellence, knowledge, and intellectual wealth has been passed through generations of Black people from ancient

African education principles. The African nation of Timbuktu served as an educational hub for its 25,000-student university from the 13th to 16th centuries.¹⁵ And, while much of the discussions about the origins of science and math are focused on the Greek and Roman empires, it was the Yoruba people of modern-day Nigeria who developed a numeric system more than 8,000 years ago, the Dogon people of Mali who provided early astronomical studies about Jupiter and Saturn, the Tanzanian people who built furnaces that could reach temperatures much higher than those of the Romans, and the nations in modern-day Egypt, South Africa, and Nigeria who discovered the use of plants that contained salicylic acid (aspirin) for pain relief.¹⁶ So, it should be no astonishment that Black people have continued pursuing education, knowledge, and economic sustenance. In ancient Africa, the roles and responsibilities of women in teaching and learning varied across different societies and cultures. In some societies, women played a significant role in teaching and passing down knowledge to the next generation. For example, in many African societies, women were responsible for teaching children and young people about the cultural traditions and values of the community. Women might also serve as mentors and role models for young people, providing guidance and support in their personal and educational development. Overall, the place of women in ancient African teaching and learning was shaped by the cultural, social, and historical context in which they lived, and the specific roles and responsibilities they held may have varied widely across different societies and cultures.

However, due to the systemic structure of racism and the unapologetic social construct of sexism, Black women have been diminished to a status unequivocally met with a double impact on the throes of racism and sexism. Economist Michelle Holder found that “approximately \$50 billion of wages were involuntarily forfeited by Black women due to discriminatory employment practices.”¹⁷

Black women remain significantly underrepresented in executive-level positions across industries in the United States. As of recent reports, Black women occupy only about 4% of C-suite roles in large corporations, a stark contrast to the 62% held by white men.¹⁸ White women hold approximately 20% of executive positions, and men of color account for around 13%.¹⁹ Despite representing a substantial portion of the workforce, Black women continue to face systemic barriers that hinder their advancement into top leadership roles. Although there has been some progress in increasing diversity in leadership positions, Black women still face significant challenges in reaching executive ranks.

Regarding advanced courses and college enrollment, Black women also face challenges. According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), Black women represented approximately 11% of all undergraduate students in the United States during the 2019–2020 academic year. This is significantly lower compared to white women, who comprised 43% of the undergraduate student population, and white men, who made up 35%. These data highlight the underrepresentation of Black women in higher education when compared to other racial and gender groups.²⁰

Black girls and women have either been dismissed from or pushed out of societal advancement, but they continue striving for achievement. As stated by Andre M. Perry, “the growing educational and cultural influence of Black women doesn’t equal protection.”²¹ This protection and support begin by reexamining how educators show up for Black girls before they become Black women.

It is important to address the systemic and institutional barriers that contribute to the disparities faced by Black girls in education, as well as the broader implications of these challenges in shaping their future opportunities. By focusing on Black girls during middle school, a critical moment in both academic and social-emotional development, educators have the unique opportunity to intervene at a pivotal stage. This is a time when Black girls are navigating not only their academic identities but also their social and emotional growth, which is crucial for their overall well-being and future success. Supporting Black girls in these formative years is not just about helping them succeed in school—it is about creating a foundation for a more equitable future across various domains, including higher education, corporate settings, and beyond.

By actively working to dismantle the barriers that impede their success and creating educational spaces that protect and uplift Black girls academically and social-emotionally, we can begin to reverse the cycles of inequity that have long plagued this group. When Black girls are given the tools to excel, both intellectually and emotionally, they gain the resilience, confidence, and critical skills necessary to thrive in higher education and enter the workforce with the strength to challenge systemic barriers. This can lead to greater representation in leadership positions, a reduction in racial disparities in pay and employment opportunities, and a more inclusive, diverse future workforce.

The atrocities and injustices that have historically affected Black girls and women—ranging from limited access to quality education to being underrepresented in leadership roles—will

begin to decline as we prioritize their success at the educational level. This work must start with an intentional focus on middle school, a time when Black girls are often at a crossroads. When educators provide support that is both academically rigorous and social-emotionally protective, we can pave the way for a generation of Black women who will have the confidence, skills, and opportunities to break down the barriers in higher education, corporate spaces, and other critical arenas.

CLAIMING THE PATH FORWARD

The systemic racism embedded in U.S. educational history has had a profound and lasting impact on the experiences of Black girls in American schools, excluding and marginalizing them from vital opportunities to learn and grow. Yet the struggle for education and equal opportunity has been relentless and courageous—and it goes on. Despite facing insurmountable odds and battling a society that questions their worth and competence, Black girls and women continue to pursue excellence, knowledge, and intellectual wealth.

To address these long-standing disparities and work toward the equitable and just educational system so many have fought for, we can and must undertake transformative practices that prioritize Black girls' experiences. It is crucial to create an educational environment that focuses on academic achievement, social-emotional well-being, and empowerment of Black girls. This requires a comprehensive approach that considers the intersectionality of race and gender, providing support and protection for Black girls' intellectual and personal growth.

Our collective responsibility is to recognize and embrace Black girls' potential, brilliance, and resilience and to invest in their future, build better educational experiences, and dismantle the systemic barriers that have hindered their progress for far too long. Only through intentional and transformative practices can we create a space in our educational system that values, uplifts, and ensures belonging for every student, regardless of their background or identity.

In this way, we honor the legacy of those who have fought for educational equity and justice for Black girls throughout history. We must continue their work and strive for a future where every Black girl has the opportunity to flourish and reach her full potential, contributing to the advancement of our society. The time for change is now, and educators, policy-makers, and communities are responsible for ensuring that our educational system truly serves all students.

Taking responsibility for this work is hard, but it's essential. I'm going to give you the means to undertake it and then, together, we'll do it. In the next chapters, you will find five key practices that will serve as tools to guide you in this journey. These practices are designed to equip you with the strategies and actions you need to make a meaningful impact. The work ahead will require dedication, self-reflection, and a willingness to challenge existing systems, but with these practices, you will have the foundation to transform the environments you work in and create lasting change. This journey is not easy, but it is possible, and I am here to support you every step of the way.

In the Middle



Honoring History, Empowering the Future—A Reflection on Black Girls' Educational Equity

In this chapter, you were introduced to the historical context of Black people's early educational experiences in America, particularly Black women. The reflections below are designed to help you deepen your understanding and consider how this history informs your current teaching practice. As you engage with these questions, reflect honestly on your personal experiences, biases, and the steps you can take to foster a more equitable learning environment for Black girls.

Reflect Deeply. Take a moment to consider what you've learned about the early educational experiences of Black people and how systemic barriers have shaped Black girls' education.

Be Specific. When answering, draw on examples from your teaching practice or observations.

Your reflections are an opportunity to deepen your understanding of Black girls' educational experiences and consider small, meaningful steps you can take to create a more inclusive and supportive classroom. This isn't about having all the answers; rather, it's about learning, growing, and making progress one step at a time.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is something that you did not know and have now learned about the early education experiences of Black people, particularly Black women in America?
2. How do you think these systemic experiences have influenced the Black girls you know or interact with in your school?

This reflection will help you connect historical context to the real, everyday experiences of the students in your care, guiding you toward more thoughtful and supportive practices.

NOTES

1. Kober, N., & Rentner, D. S. (2020). *History and evolution of public education in the US*. George Washington University, Center on Education Policy. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>
2. Georgia Archives University System of Georgia. (n.d.). *Slave laws of Georgia, 1755-1860*. https://www.georgiaarchives.org/assets/documents/Slave_Laws_of_Georgia_1755-1860.pdf
3. Smithsonian American Art Museum. (n.d.). *Literacy as freedom*. <https://americanexperience.si.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Literacy-as-Freedom.pdf>
4. Williams, H. A. (2008). *Self-taught: African American education in slavery and freedom*. University of North Carolina Press.
5. Williams, H. A. (2008). *Self-taught: African American education in slavery and freedom*. University of North Carolina Press, p. iv.
6. White, D. G. (1999). *Ar'n't I a Woman? Female slaves in the plantation South*. Norton.
7. Cromwell, W. J. (2020). *The new Negroes and the New York renaissance*. University of Georgia Press, p. 14.
8. Neem, J. N. (2017). *Democracy's schools: The rise of public education in America*. Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 177.
9. Rury, J. L. (2013). *Education and social change: Contours in the history of American schooling* (4th ed.). Routledge.
10. Kober, N., & Rentner, D. S. (2020). *History and evolution of public education in the US*. George Washington University, Center on Education Policy. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED606970.pdf>
11. Ricks, S. A. (2014). Falling through the cracks: Black girls and education. *Journal of Teaching and Learning*, 4, 10–21.
12. National Center for Education Statistics. (2019, October 30). 2019 NAEP mathematics and reading assessments: Highlighted results at grades 4 and 8 for the nation, states, and districts (NCES Publication No. 2020-012). U.S. Department of Education. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2020012>
13. U.S. Government Accountability Office. (2024, September 10). K-12 education: Nationally, Black girls receive more frequent and more severe discipline in school than other girls (GAO-24-106787). <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-24-106787.pdf>
14. Epstein, R., Blake, J., & González, T. (2017, June 27). *Girlhood interrupted: The erasure of Black girls' childhood*. Available at SSRN: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695>
15. Timbuktu: Home of Sankoré University. (2016). *Journal of Pan African Studies* (Online), 9(9), 269–271.

16. Blatch, S. (2013, February 1). *Great achievements in science and technology in Ancient Africa*. American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology. <https://www.asbmb.org/asbmb-today/science/020113/great-achievements-in-stem-in-ancient-africa>
17. Holder, M. (2022, March 31). *The “double gap” and the bottom line: African American women’s wage gap and corporate profits*. Roosevelt Institute. <https://rooseveltinstitute.org/publications/the-double-gap-and-the-bottom-line-african-american-womens-wage-gap-and-corporate-profits/>
18. Rhodes, D. (2024, February 8). *Black women in the C-suite*. Women Business Collaborative. <https://wbcollaborative.org/insights/black-women-in-the-c-suite/>
19. Zippia. (2023, June 8). *25 women in leadership statistics [2023]: Facts on the gender gap in corporate and political leadership*. Zippia.com. <https://www.zippia.com/advice/women-in-leadership-statistics/>
20. National Center for Education Statistics. (2020). *Enrollment of women in postsecondary education*. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences. <https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=98>
21. Perry, A. M. (2020, July). *To protect black women and save America from itself, elect Black women*. Brookings. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/to-protect-black-women-and-save-america-from-itself-elect-black-women/>

