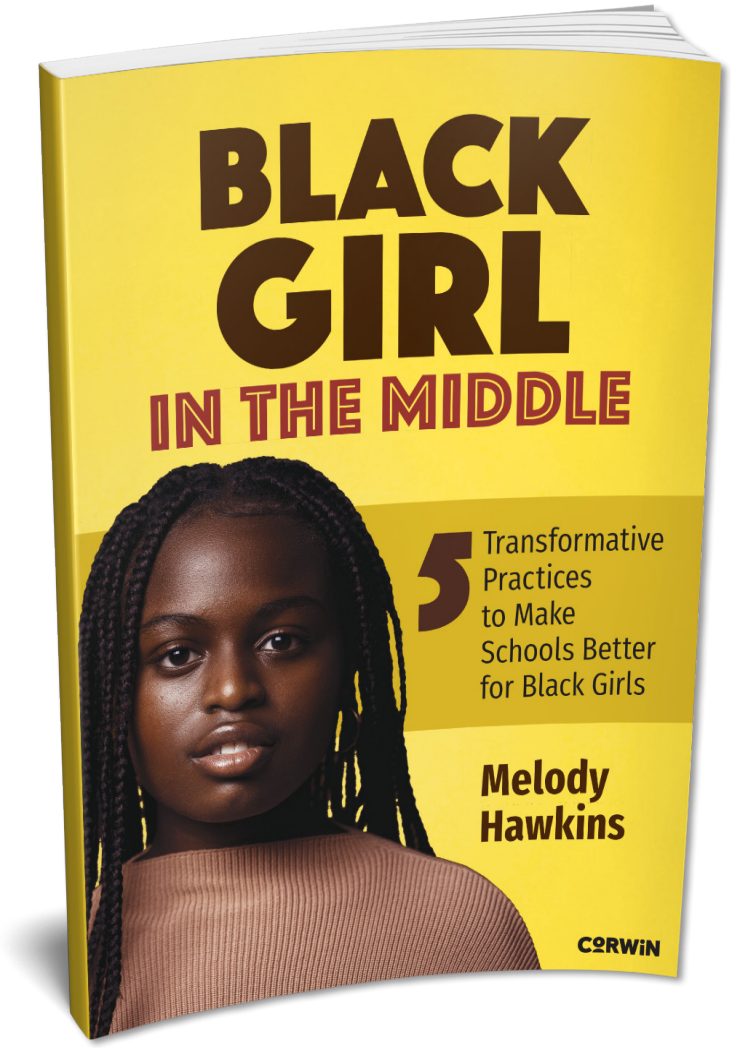

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CHAPTER 2

Practice One—Identify Your Beliefs

"Our Black girls need us to see them and to recognize their curiosity, independence, and discontent, not to assume they are combative and angry without reason."

— Monique W. Morris

I have dedicated my career to serving underrepresented communities. While I have always taught in urban schools with high populations of Black students, I have always been one of the few Black teachers in the school building. In my first year of teaching, I remember two of my white colleagues expressing that their first time being in an extended presence with a Black girl was as a teacher at our school, not during their upbringing as kids, not in their collegiate programs, and not during their student teaching year. There are a host of reasons why that was the case. Perhaps because, as a young student, my white colleagues grew up in a community with few people of color, with few or no Black people. Perhaps it is because, in their college journey, they attended an institution with few people of color enrolled. Over the past two decades, the college enrollment rate for Black students initially showed an upward trend, but it has recently declined. This shift is particularly evident in a drop in enrollment at community colleges and a stagnation in attendance at highly selective universities, leading to a decrease in overall college participation for Black students compared to earlier years. Data from Hanson highlights the racial

disparity in college enrollment, showing that in 2022, 41% of white 18- to 24-year-olds were enrolled in college, compared to just 36% of Black students, underscoring the persistent gap in higher education access.[1] It's crucial to remember that this disparity in college enrollment isn't just a result of academic success gaps, as Black students have been found to outperform white students on standardized examinations. Family income, which affects access to quality child care, enrichment activities, and educational resources, plays a significant role in shaping student outcomes, with research showing that when family income disparities are accounted for, the racial test score gap often narrows or even reverses, as seen in studies where Black students outperform white students on early assessments.[2] Discrimination, systemic educational hurdles, unequal access to resources and opportunity, and other socioeconomic factors have most certainly contributed to these statistics.

Also, it is possible that during my white colleagues' student teaching year, there was no focus or priority on ensuring they were placed in a classroom environment that would mimic the cultural, racial, or ethnic diversity experience as an in-service teacher. This lack of diverse placements in teacher preparation programs can result in teachers being unprepared to effectively engage with students from different racial, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds, which is critical for fostering an inclusive and equitable classroom environment.[3] In thinking of all the reasons why my colleagues had not had the privilege of teaching or even knowing a Black girl, I also could not help but wonder, *What do they believe about Black girls? What assumptions, biases, and perceptions might they hold, even unconsciously?* As they shared their thoughts openly with me, I began to reflect on this question: What are the first thoughts that come to their minds when my white colleagues see a Black girl sitting in their class? Some might insist, "Of course, they see a student ready to learn, just like any other student." While some may speak with passion, humility, and truth, it is essential to acknowledge that color-blindness is not a neutral stance—it is a harmful trope that denies the lived experiences and identities of Black girls and, in fact, can perpetuate racism. By disregarding their racial identity, we ignore the unique challenges Black girls face, such as discrimination and stereotyping, which shape their academic and social experiences. We must ask ourselves, *In failing to recognize the racial and gendered realities of their existence, are we reinforcing biases that impact their opportunities and experiences in the classroom?*

The history of brownness runs deep, shaping every aspect of what it means to be a Black girl. This history, however,

stretches far beyond my own experiences as a young Black girl. It is rooted in the lived realities of generations before me—my mother's experiences as a Black woman during the Civil Rights movement, my grandmother's experiences in the early 1900s, my great-grandmother's during the Reconstruction Era, and my great-great-grandmother's during slavery. These lived histories—filled with trauma, resilience, and the quest for peace—are inextricably tied to who I am today. This identity, built upon centuries of racial and gendered experiences, began long before I existed, and it is far too complex to be reduced or ignored. Yet, when people encounter Black girls like me, this identity is often underexplained, underanalyzed, or even completely overlooked. Such neglect leads to assumptions that disregard the profound, generational history behind who we are. Refusing to recognize the racial identity of Black girls is not only an act of erasure but also a refusal to acknowledge something fundamental that cannot be hidden or discarded. My identity as a Black woman, shaped by these generations, explains why I enter spaces with a predefined confidence, despite the stereotypes and biases that attempt to define me. It took time and struggle to trust that my sense of self was not shaped by the narrow assumptions of others. What I am describing here is the word "bias," which often misrepresents or distorts who people truly are.

If you are an educator reading this, you have undoubtedly encountered the word "bias" in professional development workshops. In its simplest form, bias refers to holding an opinion or making a judgment about something before fully understanding the facts. One specific type of bias, implicit bias, plays a crucial role in how we perceive and interact with others, often without conscious awareness. Implicit bias involves the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. It can manifest in subtle ways, such as unintentionally favoring one group of students over another. In my conversation with my colleagues, I found myself wondering what assumptions they might hold about Black girls in their classrooms. Given that no one can ever truly "spend enough time" with an entire racial group to fully understand the complexities of their experiences, it struck me that these assumptions were likely shaped by incomplete or biased perceptions. Implicit bias often leads to these types of misjudgments, where people unknowingly form conclusions based on stereotypes. Recognizing and addressing implicit bias is a crucial step toward fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment for all students.

Let me ease things for you before you close this book and decide that it's another book telling you what you're doing is wrong. The truth is that we all have biases. As my white colleagues shared their lack of perspective about the Black girls in their classrooms, I was forming a bias about my colleagues that perhaps they did not have a good working knowledge about how to interact with children from differing cultural or ethnic backgrounds. I could not help but continue to wonder, *If my colleagues have never been around Black girls, are they able to teach Black children and nurture our Black girls?* I know what you're probably thinking—how dare she think that? Any teacher can teach any student! I know. I know. The fact that I am sharing the biases I was developing is a massive vulnerability for me. Was I leaning toward the incorrect side of the facts about my colleagues? Perhaps I was. I can say that these colleagues have become close friends of mine over the years, and we have openly shared our early assumptions about several things in culture and specifically education. But my point is to show you that we all indeed have biases that can be formed from one encounter, one statement, one assumption.

The danger with biases, particularly those directed at Black girls, is that they can lead to harmful assumptions and behaviors that impact their well-being and success. These biases don't exist in isolation—Black girls face the intersection of both racial and gender biases, which can compound the negative effects they experience. This intersectionality amplifies the dangers, as these overlapping stereotypes often lead to more frequent and more intense misjudgments. For instance, while racial bias may assume that Black girls are less capable or less deserving of opportunities, gender bias might reinforce stereotypes of aggression or invisibility, further limiting their potential. As a result, Black girls are not only subject to external biases, but they also begin to internalize these perceptions as they form their ethnic-racial identity. This process can lead to feelings of self-doubt and reinforce the harmful stereotypes imposed upon them. In fact, the concept of **stereotype threat**—the fear of confirming negative stereotypes about one's social group—may be an important factor here, as Black girls may feel pressure to act or perform in ways that contradict their authentic selves to avoid reinforcing these stereotypes. Understanding these complexities is essential to creating a more supportive and equitable environment for Black girls, where they can thrive without the weight of societal assumptions shaping their identity.

What if I told you that, as an educator, you hold significant influence over how Black girls perceive themselves? Their understanding of their identity, especially within the academic realm,

is deeply shaped by how you—both as a teacher and as an educational leader—view them. It's easy to assume that educators understand their responsibility to foster a positive and supportive learning environment, but how often do we pause to examine how our biases and beliefs might impact students, particularly Black girls? When you think of a Black girl in your class, where does your mind go? What assumptions, conscious or unconscious, influence your actions and expectations? This is not just a philosophical question; it's a practical one that shapes students' experiences in the classroom.

In my experience, while many educators might acknowledge the importance of equitable treatment and the impact they can have, they don't always confront these responsibilities head-on. It's not just about knowing; it's about truly engaging with the implications of those beliefs. And perhaps it's not just about school, either. Black girls' academic journey is shaped by the broader societal narrative that influences their sense of belonging and potential. We'll explore this further as we dive into research on Black girls and the stereotypes that have been imposed on them.

PAUSE FOR REFLECTION

As you read through this, take a moment to think about the Black girls in your classroom. Ask yourself, What assumptions do I hold about Black girls' behaviors, abilities, or potential? Are there moments when I notice myself feeling uncomfortable or challenged by a Black girl's actions or words? Why might that be? How have my own personal beliefs influenced how I interact with Black girls in the classroom?

UNPACKING EXPERIENCES: THE RESEARCH ON BLACK GIRLS AND THE IMPACT OF SOCIETAL BIAS

To suggest that educators must pause and think about what they believe about Black girls also means that there is an issue with the beliefs about Black girls. "Teacher/educator" belief is a concern not only for Black girls but for Black students in general. 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.[4] The "belief gap," understandably, can have detrimental effects on students of color, including decreased academic achievement and

diminished self-confidence. Add the complexities of being a girl in this context, and there appears the bias that Black girls face.

This book is premised on the fact that Black girls do not get the same attention as other student groups. In fact, it is thought that researchers, activists, policymakers, and funders rarely devote their entire attention to the vulnerabilities that Black and other girls of color face.[5] In sifting through the educational research that does exist about perceptions, assumptions, biases, and beliefs about Black girls, I have been able to identify some key studies that support the necessity for more attention to the experiences of Black girls in school. As you read through my synopsis of these studies, I encourage you to continue thinking about the question asked earlier: *What do* ***you*** *believe about Black girls?*

STUDY 1

The qualitative study, *The Impossibility of Being "Perfect and White,"* conducted by four Black women researchers, explores how Black girls perceive and interpret their schooling experiences through racial and gendered lenses, while emphasizing the importance of conversation spaces that facilitate their critical reflection on both individual and collective educational experiences.[6]

But before we dig into the findings, first, check out that title. Does it lay on your chest a bit? It should. If you are a person of color reading this, then you understand the title all too well. When I came across this study, I read the title three times before entering the findings. I recalled being in elementary, middle, and even high school and listening to my teacher call out those students demonstrating behavior the teacher deemed "appropriate" to get the entire class to demonstrate this "appropriate" behavior. Behaviors like sitting in an "appropriate" way, speaking in an "appropriate" tone, dressing "appropriately," and asking and answering questions "appropriately." This positive reinforcement strategy is a common strategy used by teachers. But have you asked yourself who determines what is appropriate? Without conscious effort, it can be a harmful comparison approach that sends the message of behavior correction through the lens of implicit bias. This bias speaks to cultural assimilation as acceptable behavior. I have witnessed this strategy used in ways that highlight the acceptable behavior, but that behavior was typically demonstrated by a white student—specifically, a white girl.

If you are white and feeling uncomfortable, that's completely normal, and I encourage you to continue reading. Many accounts highlight how disciplinary policies and behavior management strategies can inadvertently erase cultural considerations, attempting instead to align students' behavior with norms rooted in whiteness. While I do not suggest that teachers are consciously creating these environments, it's important to recognize that systemic racism is embedded in the structures and policies of our educational system (as discussed in the Introduction). This manifests through microaggressions, cultural assimilation pressures, and colorblindness—ideas that reinforce the notion that "whiteness is right." These challenges further emphasize the need to critically examine our classroom practices. However, this process cannot begin until we confront our own biases and deeply held belief systems, acknowledging them and working to overcome them through intentional reflection and action.

The study also highlighted how conversation spaces for Black girls can improve their experiences. One of the essential questions that the researchers sought to answer was *How do Black girls describe and understand their school experiences as racialized and gendered?* The researchers conducted this study as an extension of a state project that sought to support school leaders with identifying efforts to improve Black students' academic achievement. In examining the data from the initial study, the researchers realized that there is more to be discovered regarding Black girls' experiences in schools. Through structured conversations at five public high schools and in group sizes ranging from 9 to 19 at each site, Black girl students engaged in dialogue to describe and interpret their racialized and gendered school experiences. The researchers' findings, summarized in the next section, revealed five attitudes and treatments that impact Black girls: *Notions of Femininity, Policing and Surveillance of Black Girl Bodies, Black Girls and (Anti)Intellectualism, Marginalization of Black Female Athletes, Black Girls in Relational Contexts,* and *Necessary Support Structures for Black Girls.*

NOTIONS OF FEMININITY

The expectations placed on Black girls to conform to narrow definitions of femininity are often reinforced through explicit comments from adults. For example, one girl shared, "If you just do one wrong thing, they'll be like, 'You're a lady, you weren't supposed to do that!' But everybody makes mistakes," highlighting how even minor deviations are harshly judged.

POLICING AND SURVEILLANCE OF BLACK GIRL BODIES

The hypersexualization of Black girls' clothing choices often leads to stricter disciplinary actions compared to their white peers. One student expressed frustration over this double standard, stating, "I'll be sent to the office for a coat, rain boots, and a pair of overalls that's two times my size . . . but Sally's gonna go learn and get the A+, while I'm stuck with a B because my knees are showing, which [with sarcasm] are very sexual, obviously." This reveals how policing their bodies disrupts their learning and reinforces inequities.

BLACK GIRLS AND (ANTI)INTELLECTUALISM

Black girls in schools often face both racial and gendered biases that diminish their intellectual potential. A student highlighted this stereotype, stating, "[A] lot of white people and people who aren't Black don't think that we know how to use our brains . . . so they have low expectations." This perception not only undermines their academic efforts but also perpetuates systemic inequities in educational opportunities and expectations.

MARGINALIZATION OF BLACK FEMALE ATHLETES

Black female athletes often encounter racialized and gendered bias in high school sports, leading to feelings of exclusion and invalidation. A student reflected on this disparity, saying, "Women's sports get no support moneywise, none at all . . . [teachers] will announce, 'Congratulations to the boys team,' but they won't say if [the girls] won a trophy or anything." This lack of recognition and support highlights how systemic inequities in sports mirror broader societal biases, undermining Black girls' value and contributions as athletes.

BLACK GIRLS IN RELATIONAL CONTEXTS

Black girls often experience complex social dynamics marked by competition, jealousy, and emotional intensity within their peer relationships. One participant shared, "We know we should have each other's backs, but it's hard when everyone's always trying to one-up each other, and things just get out of hand."

NECESSARY SUPPORT STRUCTURES FOR BLACK GIRLS

Support structures such as other mothering and warm demander pedagogy were crucial for Black girls navigating challenges in their schools, as they provided mentorship, affirmation, and high expectations. One student reflected on the impact of her teacher, saying, "Ms. J is like a big mom to everybody, she just wants the best for us . . . she keeps it real with everybody."

Overall, the study highlights the need for schools to address the unique challenges Black girls face and create more inclusive and supportive environments for them. This may involve addressing negative stereotypes, promoting cultural competence among teachers and staff, and providing more resources and support for Black girls.

STUDY 2

"'They Told Me What I Was Before I Could Tell Them What I Was': Black Girls' Ethnic-Racial Identity Development Within Multiple Worlds" is a research article examining Black girls' ethnic-racial identity development in the United States.[7] The study is based on in-depth interviews with Black girls aged 12 to 18 and their parents, and it explores the various social, cultural, and historical factors that shape their identity. The article highlights how Black girls navigate and negotiate their identities within multiple worlds, including their families, communities, schools, and broader society. It also discusses the impact of racism and discrimination on their identity development and the role of resilience in helping them navigate these challenges.

Perhaps one of the most staunchly rich findings is the Black girl interviewees' perceptions of their race in social contexts. The girls' definitions of race were grounded in their social realities, with some referring to specific, observable physical attributes and others referring to cultural and socioeconomic stereotypical characteristics. For example, Desiree said being Black meant having darker skin but also living in a "bad" neighborhood. Terry described how there are two types of Black at her school: "African one" and "Ghetto." Aaliyah said she felt like her peers made assumptions about her race that made her "uncomfortable." Aaliyah also described being African American as "something people don't like" and associated with violence and ghetto stereotypes. Only two girls in the class provided positive beliefs and attitudes about their own ethnic-racial identities.

This study also highlights the surprising understanding of how differently Black girls defined race and what it meant to be of their race. While Black girls' conceptions of race tended to emphasize more tangible concepts, like physical appearance, their understanding of themselves tended to emphasize interactions within their societal domains and microsystems. The researchers contend that it is crucial to distinguish between students' understanding of the term "race" and how they apply it to their own lives. The high proportion of Black girls who spoke about embarrassing social encounters because of their ethnicity suggests that social experiences are crucial for shaping Black girls' early adolescent self-perceptions. The study concludes by discussing the implications of these findings for supporting the healthy development of Black girls and promoting a more inclusive and equitable society.

The study sheds light on the often-painful realities of Black girls' ethnic-racial identity development, illustrating how they are forced to navigate multiple worlds, each with its own set of expectations and stereotypes. As I reflect on these findings, I am reminded of my own experiences working in diverse educational settings, where Black students are constantly negotiating their identities in the face of societal judgments. Like the girls in the study, many of the students I've worked with have had to confront assumptions about their race, sometimes from peers who have little understanding of their lived realities.

The findings of each of these studies reinforce what I've observed in my own career: the deep need for educators and leaders to not only be aware of the challenges Black students face but also create spaces where they feel empowered to define themselves outside the constraints of these limiting stereotypes. It's about offering more than just academic support; it's about fostering an environment that respects and nurtures their cultural identities, allowing them to develop into strong, resilient individuals. These studies call for a shift in how we think about race and identity in educational spaces—moving from a place of deficit and discomfort to one of celebration and affirmation. It's time to provide Black girls with the space to truly understand and embrace who they are, free from the weight of others' misconceptions.

UNVEILING BELIEFS: A PATH TO EMPOWERMENT

In the journey to build better educational experiences for Black girls, it becomes evident that transformative practices are

essential for educators. This chapter illuminates the need for a crucial starting point: *identifying our beliefs*.

The reflections within this chapter have unveiled the glaring gap in understanding that some educators may have about Black girls. In some cases, educators may not have had meaningful interactions with Black girls throughout their lives, and this lack of exposure can lead to biases and assumptions. The underlying premise is that acknowledging these biases is the first step toward dismantling them. We all harbor biases, often shaped by our limited exposure and cultural contexts, as noted previously by my own bias that I had to dismantle. It's not about pointing fingers but about self-awareness and growth. By recognizing that biases exist, educators can actively work toward creating inclusive and equitable learning environments for Black girls. This can involve seeking diverse perspectives, engaging in professional development on cultural competency, and fostering open dialogue with students to address misconceptions or stereotypes. Ultimately, educators can better support the success and well-being of Black girls in the education system through continuous self-reflection and a commitment to unlearning biases.

The research and studies shared in this chapter further emphasize the necessity of this work. Black girls face unique challenges in the educational system, including negative stereotypes, differential treatment, and a lack of inclusivity. The "belief gap" revealed in educational settings highlights how educators' biases can adversely affect Black students'—and especially Black girls'—experiences, leading to diminished self-confidence and academic achievement.

The path forward requires ongoing individual reflection and collective/system action. It's about acknowledging our biases and actively working to de-bias ourselves. The practice of identifying our beliefs about Black girls is about building a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

THE WORK BEGINS

A central point connects each of these studies. The way that Black girls perceive themselves, experience school, and comprehend their place in society is primarily influenced by their everyday interactions with both peers and adults ("Perfect and White").

So, now what? What's next? Now, we actively work to challenge the biases against Black girls and create belief systems built on positive framing about their capabilities. What I will

not be suggesting is another whole staff, schoolwide diversity training—this will not do much for changing deep-rooted biases—nor will I suggest another awkward cross-racial circle where everyone is asked to express their feelings about racism in the school but instead people of color end up educating their white colleagues about the stereotypes or biases experienced daily. No, not this time. This time, the work must be completely individual. Now is the time to look inward for those biases and then push outward for a belief system that drives one's attitude toward Black girls' experiences in school, contributing to a positive vision for Black girls' academic and social outcomes. All of this is to say that it is time to tear down the bias wall against our Black girls by tackling educators' personal belief systems first.

In this area, I've found value in the work of University of Wisconsin—Madison scholar and researcher Dr. Patricia Devine. She proposes, first and foremost, that bias is a habit—a learned behavior that becomes automatic and unconscious over time. Like any other unconscious behavior, it can be difficult to change, but it *is* possible to break the habit. To achieve this essential process of dismantling one's bias, Dr. Devine suggests three conditions that must exist individually: the intentional acknowledgment that biases exist, attention to triggers that influence stereotypical responses, and an investment of time to practice strategies that disrupt automatic or habitual assumptions about someone who is culturally or ethnically different.[8] Once these conditions are in place, it is possible to begin working to "de-bias."

Dr. Devine and her colleagues developed a program focused on multiple approaches to reducing implicit bias and breaking prejudice habits, including the following:

- **Individuation** means getting to know people as individuals instead of making assumptions based on the group they belong to.

  Example: If someone assumes that all employees from a certain background are shy, individuation will involve talking to each employee to learn about their unique qualities. For instance, by asking questions and getting to know them better, they might discover that one employee is very outgoing, which helps break the stereotype and see that person as an individual, not just part of a group.

- **Stereotype replacement** is a reassociation technique that encourage individuals to reevaluate their biases and consider alternative perspectives.

  Example: A simple reassociation exercise might ask participants to think of positive qualities or successful

examples of people from a group they have biased assumptions about. For example, if someone holds a stereotype about young people from low-income backgrounds, they might be encouraged to think of successful individuals who have come from those environments, thus helping to break down the bias.

- **Counter-stereotyping** involves exposing individuals to counter-stereotypical information and examples to challenge their preconceived notions about certain groups of people.

  Example: In this approach, a participant might be shown stories or images of women excelling in fields traditionally dominated by men, such as engineering or technology. By encountering these counter-stereotypical examples, the individual's biases about women in these fields can be challenged and disrupted.

- **Increasing opportunities for contact** is an approach that involves bringing individuals from different groups together in a positive and supportive environment to foster understanding and reduce bias.

  Example: A group of individuals from different racial or cultural backgrounds might participate in a shared community project, such as volunteering at a local food bank. This collaborative setting allows participants to interact and get to know each other as individuals, building empathy and reducing the impact of biases they may have had previously.

- **Perspective taking** means trying to see things from the point of view of someone from a stereotyped group. This helps reduce automatic judgments based on group membership.

  Example: Imagine a teacher trying to understand what it's like to be a student from a different background. By thinking about the challenges that student might face, like being misunderstood or facing prejudice, the teacher can better empathize and respond with more fairness, rather than relying on stereotypes.

These same approaches can apply to educators' work moving from deficit to strengths-based mindsets. This work ultimately leads to a belief system that allows academic and social-emotional safety for Black girls.

It is unreasonable to expect to do this work in one day, with one book on one reflection page. De-biasing, reframing perspectives,

and dismantling stereotypes is a lifetime journey. It requires ongoing effort and self-reflection to identify and address biases. I will say that the educators who support Black girls do not have the luxury to postpone this work. There must be a beginning, and that can be today.

On the reflection page "In the Middle: Identify Your Beliefs," you will first think through some approaches and considerations for disrupting bias and then apply the approach to biases about Black girls. You will then begin to build a positive belief system about Black girls. This belief system will fuel your vision and will certainly shape the culture and climate of your classroom and school building.

If we want to transform Black girls' experiences in school, it is a necessary step for educators to do the work to constantly crush biases and identify their strengths-based beliefs about Black girls to cultivate better outcomes.

In the Middle

Identify Your Beliefs

In this chapter, you explored the stereotypes and biases that Black girls face in educational settings, particularly how these biases shape their identities and experiences. The reflections below are designed to help you examine your own beliefs and how they influence your interactions with Black girls in the classroom. As you engage with these questions, reflect honestly on your perceptions, the biases you may hold, and the strategies you can implement to create a more supportive, inclusive, and empowering learning environment for Black girls.

REFLECTION TASK

The concept of de-biasing and reducing implicit bias can be applied to educators' work in developing strengths-based beliefs about Black girls.

In the space below, you will use one of these approaches to begin this work.

Reassociation: Black girls have often been on the receiving end of biased descriptors such as angry, disrespectful, loud, aggressive, feisty, mean, insecure, and lazy. Reframe these negative associations into positive affirming statements about Black girls.

Example: *Black girls are lazy.* Reframe: *Black girls are working to build hope.*

_____

_____

_____

Belief Statement: Now that you have developed positive, affirming statements about Black girls, transfer these statements into a belief statement about the Black girls you impact.

Sentence Starter: *I believe the Black girls I teach are . . .*

_____

_____

_____

Keep Doing the Work: How will you allow your actions to communicate your strengths-based beliefs about Black girls?

_____

_____

_____

Unseen Bias

A Teacher's Wake-up Call

Ms. Thompson had always prided herself on her deep love for teaching and her commitment to seeing each of her students as an individual. She had a special connection with Kayla, a bright Black girl in her class whom she often encouraged to be "tougher" in the face of challenges. Ms. Thompson saw so much potential in Kayla and often found herself thinking of her as a leader-in-the-making. She thought she was preparing Kayla for the world outside, believing that Black girls needed to be stronger to survive. But one day, Kayla pulled her aside after class.

"Ms. Thompson, when you said I needed to be tougher, it felt like you didn't think I was strong enough already," Kayla said, her voice soft but firm. "I don't hear you saying that to other girls. It's like you expect me to be different. But I don't get why."

A heavy silence filled the room. Ms. Thompson's heart sank as she realized the impact of her words. She had always believed she was helping Kayla, preparing her for challenges that Black girls like her would face. She had never considered how her well-meaning advice might be rooted in assumptions—biases—that she hadn't even recognized. She had unintentionally reinforced a stereotype, one that suggested Black girls had to be tougher, more resilient, less vulnerable, simply because of their racial identity.

"I'm so sorry, Kayla," Ms. Thompson said, her voice trembling. "I never meant to make you feel like that. I didn't mean to hurt you. I thought I was helping you be ready for the world. But I see now that I was basing that on only a small view of what I know about what you might need."

It wasn't just that Kayla felt hurt—it was that, for so long, Ms. Thompson had unconsciously bought into the very stereotypes she thought she was immune to. She had assumed that Black girls, especially, needed to be tougher, more independent, and more resilient to survive in the world. She hadn't seen how those assumptions could leave her students feeling unseen, misunderstood, or, worse, as if they had to carry a burden of strength that wasn't theirs to bear.

"I'm really grateful that you told me, Kayla," Ms. Thompson continued, her voice sincere. "You didn't have to speak up, but I'm so glad you did. I've learned something important today, and I promise to do better. I want you to know that you don't have to be anything but yourself. You are more than enough just as you are."

As Kayla smiled, the weight on Ms. Thompson's chest didn't lift immediately. The realization that she had unintentionally contributed to the very stereotypes she had worked so hard to avoid was painful. But it also marked a turning point in her teaching journey. She knew now that this was the beginning of a deeper reflection on her own biases—of the ways in which even the most well-intentioned beliefs can reinforce harmful ideas about Black girls.

From that day on, Ms. Thompson worked harder to examine her assumptions and actions. She educated herself about the

challenges that Black girls face in education, attended workshops on culturally responsive teaching, and sought feedback from her Black students to make sure she was truly seeing them for who they were—without the weight of stereotypes or bias. She learned that teaching her students to be resilient didn't mean expecting them to bear a burden they didn't have to. Instead, it meant helping them embrace their authentic selves, giving them the space and support they needed to thrive, exactly as they were.

And while she couldn't erase the past, Ms. Thompson was committed to being a better teacher—not just for Kayla, but for every student who walked through her door. A teacher who understood that loving her students meant challenging her own biases, too.

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