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"So she might know her beauty": Creating safe spaces for Black girls in the middle grades

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Abstract: Leveraging the momentum of the #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter movements as a call for change, this piece focuses on how middle grades communities can better support and protect their Black female students. Coming together as middle grades teacher leaders, we took up The Bluest Eye as the starting point for a discussion of these issues. Grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship and practice, this piece shares anecdotes from our staff book club session to create a working outline for how middle grades might begin to build safer environments for the Black girls in our classrooms and communities.

Keywords: *Black girls, gender-based violence, public schools, sexual harassment, Title IX rights*

***The Successful Middle School: This We Believe* characteristics**:

- Educators respect and value young adolescents.
- The school environment is welcoming, inclusive, and affirming for all.
- Every student's academic and personal development is guided by an adult advocate.
- School safety is addressed proactively, justly, and thoughtfully.

> Thrown, in this way, into the binding conviction that only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people. (Morrison, 1970, p. 47)

In the Fall of 2019, in a metro Charlotte book club session with a small group of likeminded middle grades teachers and teacher-leaders, we took up Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison's first novel as a shared reading— *The Bluest Eye.* Morrison, a world-renowned Black woman author, was committed to penning authentic narratives of Black American girlhood and womanhood. Though her novels tenderly portray Black female characters, Morrison did not shy away from the harsh realities so many Black women and girls have faced at the intersection of race, class, and gender. *The Bluest Eye* centers the narrative of Pecola Breedlove, an eleven-year-old Black girl, and the racism and sexual violence she experiences in a small Ohio town in the 1940s. The novel ends with the haunting image of Pecola, driven to insanity, wandering the streets of Lorraine to the diverted eyes of her neighbors.

Some five years before our afternoon book club session, the public school district in Wake County, North Carolina banned Morrison's award winning book from middle and secondary reading lists for a perceived lack of literacy and moral value. In response to the decision, Mike Meno of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) talked about the courage it takes for teachers and students to take up issues of race, gender, sexuality, and violence in classrooms. Meno explained, "By using literature as a way to examine these issues we can better prepare students and young people to understand these very real issues that exist in the world that they are going to enter" (Hankerson, 2014). As a discipline and as individuals, we collectively champion health and wellness across curricula, school-wide programs, and related policies as a predicate for and goal of the work we hope to achieve. Far from hoping for a miracle, we know that middle grades communities are a reflection of deliberate and purposeful individual and collective action. Thus, we decided to use *The Bluest Eye* as our first book club text.

Though we believe classic works like Morrison's should be welcomed in all middle and secondary classrooms, we selected this book with the intention of facilitating a dialogue amongst middle grade educators about Black girlhood, particularly around themes of sexual harassment/violence and gender-based violence. Since #MeToo entered the public discourse and with the international emergence of #BlackLivesMatter as a call for change, many middle grades educators are starting to have courageous conversations about gendered harassment/violence and how these instances intersect with systemic racism. In many cases, these important exchanges have come from deep within our lived experiences and begin with informal interactions with like-minded peers. Brinegar et al. (2020), for example, recently underscored our shared responsibility as a middle school professional community to unmask cultures of white supremacy so that all of our students and colleagues realized their fullest humanity. We would add that the urgency they describe is particularly critical in regard to the humanity of the Black girls in our classrooms and institutions.

In this article, we describe how *The Bluest Eye* became a critical starting point for approaching how we might leverage pivotal societal movements around gender and race to support and extend our middle grades' praxis, strengthening our commitment as middle grades professionals. To clarify, we never conceptualized the book club described in the pages that follow as research or even a small-scale study. The hour we spent together discussing the text was simply, yet purposefully, used to visualize what it could mean for the school's Black girls if middle grades educators took a unified stand to say, "no more." Grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship and practice, this practitioner piece shares anecdotes from our book club session to create a working outline of how middle grade communities might begin to build safer environments for the Black girls in our classrooms and communities.

Sexual harassment, gender-based violence, and Black women and girls

According to the U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, sexual harassment involves "unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical harassment of a sexual nature" (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, n.d., para. 1). Behavior that constitutes as sexual harassment includes but is not limited to: Insults about a person's sexuality; threats of sexual violence/blackmailing in exchange for a sexual act; sexual touching; spreading rumors about sexual preference, activities, etc.; suggestive texts, e-mails, social media messages (nude photos, sexually explicit chain letters); asking for sexual favors; and sexual bullying (Girls for Gender Equity, 2018).

Gender-based violence refers to attacks committed based on a person's gender, sex, or gender expression. These behaviors include but are not limited to: Stalking; pressure to perform sexual acts; unwanted sexual touches; forcible sexual intercourse; verbal abuse in the form of anti-gay anti-woman slurs; cyber bullying; and verbal or physical threats (American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU], 2011). Contextualizing gender-based violence as a large-scale issue, it is critical to note that globally, an estimated one out of three women has experienced gender-based violence (Bent-Goodley, 2009). Sexual harassment also disproportionately impacts women (Durana et al., 2018). Stop Street Harassment (2018) found that 77% of women have experienced verbal sexual harassment, 51% have been touched in a sexual way without their permission, 41% have been sexually harassed online, and 27% were sexual assault survivors.

Unfortunately, these trends of sexual harassment and gendered violence are replicated in school settings. Hill and Kearl (2011) found that 56% of girls in grades 7–12 experienced sexual harassment at school. They also uncovered some troubling themes about in-school sexual harassment. In-school sexual harassment is a cycle, where the overwhelming majority of victims admitted to also being culprits (92% of girls and 80% of boys). Of the students who admitted to sexually harassing their peers, many did not think of it as a "big deal" (44%) or claimed they were just "trying to be funny" (39%), and in addition to girls being more likely to experience sexual harassment, the effects of incidents caused girls to report higher rates of psychological distress such as loss of sleep, not wanting to go to school, or changing schools all together.

Moreover, many girls who are victims of sexual harassment experienced a strain on their mental and emotional health, in which the trauma of the incident/s can be used as a predictor of their withdrawal from classwork or absenteeism (Chesire, 2004). In an analysis that looked solely at middle grades participants of American Association of University Women's (AAUW) study on sexual harassment and young people, the reseachers found that these were the top five responses for how this age range experienced in-school sexual harassment organized by the categories verbal or physical sexual harassment and sexual assault (Espelage et al., 2016): Being called "gay" or

"lesbian"; homophobic language (verbal sexual harassment); being targets of sexual commentary, usually referencing to breasts or butt or being the subjects of sexual rumors or having sexual things written on bathroom walls (verbal sexual harassment); being touched on butt or brushed up against (physical sexual harassment); being "pantsed," having their pants pulled down in front of peers (physical sexual harassment); and being forced to kiss or perform any act of sexual nature (sexual assault). Espelage et al. (2016) also explored a sixth category that was noted as unexpected by the researchers, the dismissal of sexual harassment victimization experiences.

School staff's disregard of the sexual harassment and gendered violence committed by students is particularly troubling. For a number of middle grade students that experience harassment on school campuses, these instances occur in what Williams (2019) called sexual harassment "hot spots"—areas that are not closely monitored by adults like bus stops, cafeterias, and hallways. Harassment can also take place online via social media sites. One study showed that 59% of teens said that they have experienced some type of cyberbullying or harassment, 25% said they received explicit images they did not ask for and 7% had explicit images of themselves shared without permission (Anderson, 2018). Even if middle grade staff seldom witnesses sexual harassment, it is wise to assume that it may be occurring in our blind spots.

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For educators of young adolescents, this subject is not always an easy one to approach or accept. We may receive frequent professional development training on bullying behaviors but often without squarely addressing sexual harassment, as administrators can fail to acknowledge that these behaviors exist in the middle grades (Charmaraman, 2013). However, research supports that this type of training is critical for middle grade educators and students. Espelage et al. (2013) suggested that students who received anti-bullying, sexual and gender-based harassment messaging during the middle grade years were less likely to engage in sexual violence and homophobic name calling in high school. Moreover, early adolescence is a critical time for young people to confront gender stereotypes. Because of this, Ingram et al. (2019) recommends middle grades students learn about sexual harassment and gender-based violence in a way that challenges pro-violence attitudes, traditional masculinity, and the dismissiveness of sexual harassment.

The adultification of Black girls

To understand Morrison's Pecola and the unique impacts of Black girls' vulnerability to sexual harassment and gender-based violence, it is important to consider the history of Black girlhood in the United States. Black American children have a long history of being denied childhood. The first experiences of enslaved African children in the U.S. were defined by harsh labor, usually working alongside adults (King, 2011). Playtime was non-existent. Rather, Black children were subjected to the same dehumanization as Black adults and were "severely punished for exhibiting normal child-like behavior" (Dumas & Nelson, 2016, p. 33). In other words, contemporary Black adolescent females are subject to the same sort of adultification as their adolescent ancestors (Epstein et al., 2017). Or, as M. Morris (2016) clarified, "this compression [has] stripped Black girls of their childhood freedoms [and] renders Black girlhood interchangeable with Black womanhood" (p. 34).

The legacy of this historical positioning for Black girls is still present in today's classrooms, whether we are readily aware of it or not. Studies have shown that teachers of all races perceive Black girls to be more assertive, disruptive, more likely to challenge authority, less attentive to classwork, louder, and more unladylike than their non-Black female peers (Fordham, 1993; Francis, 2012; E. Morris, 2007). These teacher perceptions have also led to Black girls facing higher levels of teacher discrimination, resulting in disproportionately higher school discipline and suspension rates (Butler-Barnes & Innis-Thompson, 2020; Lamboy, 2020; M. Morris, 2016; Walker, 2020; Wun, 2014).

The intersectional gendered-racial social constructs of Black girlhood can also influence how school staff identifies and intervenes (or not) in instances of sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

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Battle (2010) presented traits commonly associated with femininity such as passive, sensitive, weak, flirtatious, submissive, and accepting. In contrast, these collective traits

were said to be used to describe masculinity: aggressive, non-emotional, competitive, sexually aggressive, and rebellious (Battle, 2010). Adding "Black" and "adolescent" shifts the social perceptions of Black youth's identities and sexual expressions. Some stereotypical beliefs associated with Black adolescent sexuality are hypersexual, deviant, compulsive, non-monogamous (Black males), dysfunctional family units, more likely to engage in sex at younger ages, higher rates of teen pregnancy, and higher STI rates (Battle, 2010; Leadbeater & Way, 1996; Smith-Evans et al., 2014).

Layering on these stereotypical characteristics Black adolescent sexuality and Black girls' positionality as they transition to teenagers results in a falsely manufactured lens many educators use to view, punish, and fail to protect Black girlhood. Labels of being angry, loud, and promiscuous can "shape school officials' views of Black girls in a critically harmful way" (Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017, p. 3). Because these stereotypes create a counternarrative to what is traditionally accepted as feminine behavior, Black girls' non-conformity to gender stereotypes may result in harsh responses from school staff. Research also insinuates that school staff's responses to Black girls who report sexual harassment is often inadequate, reflecting these harmful racial and gender stereotypes (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). The findings of Crenshaw et al.'s (2015) national report on the status of Black women and girls compelled the authors to urge education policy makers to make combatting sexual harassment a top priority. Not only do Black girls experience in-school sexual harassment that is more physical/violent, but their harassment also tends to be more public and results in longer term damage than their non-Black classmates (AAUW Educational Foundation, 2001; Onyeka-Crawford et al., 2017; Tonnesen, 2013). Consistant with this pattern, studies focused specifically on middle grades found that r Black girls report higher levels of physical sexual harassment than their peers with less intervention from school staff (Espelage et al., 2016; Harris & Kruger, 2020).

Talking about *The Bluest Eye*

Our reading of *The Bluest Eye* came about when a middle grades administrator approached us to pilot a voluntary professional development series styled as a book club to address the school's increasingly diverse enrollment. Like many middle school professionals, we love reading —connecting ourselves, other texts, and the world to great books; and, had some fiction and nonfiction favorites in mind for the club. Two 7th grade colleagues signed up—a Black woman English language arts educator in her fifth year of teaching (Tamera) and a White male social studies educator in his third (Dan). With the authors, the book club pilot began with four participants.

To provide some additional context about who we (the authors) are, both of us share a connection to Washington D.C., where Tia, a Black womanist activist, grew up and taught and where Spencer, a Chamorro male English as a Second Language educator, taught for ten years. As we discussed theme options for monthly club reads, we both agreed that it was important to select a literary piece that highlighted the complexities of Black girlhood. We remembered Wake County's ban of *The Bluest Eye* and the controversy it created. We wanted to further unpack the story they did not want told, as a means to encourage dialogue about the realities of Black girls in the middle grades. Muth et al. (2007) examined middle grades teachers' struggle to take up and respond effectively to controversial topics and their propensity to "skirt" issues of sexuality (Puchner & Klein, 2012), let alone taboo intersections of sexuality, race, and gender. Even as the middle grades community struggles with the nexus of race and sexual and gender-based violence, as a profession we know that Black women of all ages and across contexts are more likely than their non-Black counterparts to experience intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and physical aggression—and also less likely to report such violence (Lacey et al., 2021). So we decided to take it head on.

We scheduled a meeting date for the Morrison book club session with a month's advance notice for independent reading. For the one hour session we developed several broad discussion prompts to get us started in thinking aloud about Morrison's novel, but mostly we were interested in just thinking aloud about the text and its implications for Black girls' lives in educational spaces.

Connecting Peacola's story to our classrooms: Reflecting on intersectionality and the school experiences of Black girls

Crenshaw's (1991) intersectional theory can help us better understand the lived experiences of Black girls at the crossroads of race, class, and gender. Intersectionality

theory examines these social identities and how their relationships result in complex experiences. The gendered and racialized intersectionality of Black girlhood influences how school staff identifies, or does not identify, the emotional and physical violence Black girls are subjected to (Nunn, 2018). For Pecola, being a Black girl from a working class family in a rural town not only shaped her life and encounters, but her identities also defined her victimization. Intersectionality was often discussed in our book club sessions, particularly the ways in which society views, thus treats, Black girls and how it was apparent in the middle schools where we teach or have taught.

In one discussion, our colleague Tamera described how she had seen Crystal, a Black female 7th grader, repeatedly hit her male peer, Anthony. When Tamera yelled for Crystal to stop, Crystal complained that it was Anthony who would not keep his hands off of her. Tamera remembered reprimanding Crystal, chalking it up to adolescent hormones, boys will be boys/girls will be girls. When she told a group of teachers about the incident later that day, Tamera learned that Anthony had a school-wide reputation for inappropriately grabbing girls. According to the teachers, it appeared as if he thought it was funny. But his actions, whether he was aware of it or not, were of a sexual nature and clearly caused Crystal harm. Thinking back, Tamera realized that Crystal was asserting her agency and protecting herself. Thus, Tamera realized how her judgments about Crystal could have resulted in the student's revictimization. Meanwhile, she heard Anthony's behavior had not changed and he was still grabbing girls in and out of class.

Dan brought up how he was often uncertain and uncomfortable when he overheard his Black female students being teased about their bodies. Like his colleague Tamera, Dan recognized that the harassment Black girls experienced was different in that it was normalized by students and staff, himself included. He explained that it was almost like "a part of our school culture." Dan said that most days, he would walk down the hall and expect to hear "those kinds of things." Akin to Tamera and Dan's anecdotes, in a study examining a cohort of Black girls' experiences of gender and sexual harassment at school, Miller (2008) noted that these occurrences were "an everyday feature of the cultural milieu at school" (p. 130). Miller described these incidents to often be highly public, in the presence of other students and even school staff. In such cases, school staff either ignored the problem or misidentified Black girls defending themselves as the perpetrators.

With us as a sounding board, Dan began talking through why his uneasiness was still not motivation for him to intervene. He was still uncertain of his classroom management skills, juggling how to build rapport with students while maintaining his teacherly authority in the classroom. Not to mention, he was still working his way through those first years of classroom planning. We asked him what would make him more comfortable about intervening in the future. Both Dan and Tamera agreed that they lacked professional training on the proper protocols for doing so. They also were not sure if these instances of harassment and/or gendered violence needed to be documented. In any event, the school, they explained, did not put much emphasis on defusing, disciplining or deterring gender-based and sexual violence for girls in general.

Connecting to Tamera and Dan's stories, Spencer shared a moment he vividly remembered. During a school assembly in a public school in D.C., at the height of the AIDS epidemic, a Black girl inadvertently outed her mother as being H.I.V. positive. The roars of laughter and mocking ensued for minutes, a Black woman's suffering turned into a schoolhouse joke. But the implications were no laughing matter. Spencer mentioned how these social constructs shape not only how we see each other and the interactions between us, but also how we see ourselves. This can be especially harmful for girls and people of color. Stereotypes about one's identity, more specifically the intersection of many, become normalized as truths or as seen in the assembly, laughed at as jokes. These very constructs also influence how school communities (do not) react to Black girls' pain.

For Tia, the notion of Black girl' under-protection from ridicule in educational spaces made her recall how she had witnessed school staff become perpetrators of violence. One day during lunch, a fight broke out between two girls at the majority-Black middle school in D.C. where she taught. A school resource officer intervened by grabbing one of the girls by her long braids. The child screamed, grasping on to her scalp as she was all but dragged out of the cafeteria. Tia reported the officer to her higher-ups but was told his use of force was necessary. The book club agreed that while peer violence (fighting) in school was never acceptable, the additional violence inflicted by the resource officer was completely uncalled for.

Though Pecola is a fictional character, without much prompting, we were able to not only connect Pecola's

experiences to the experiences of our students, but we were also able to connect the stories of our Black female students to one another. We linked the ways in which Black girls were not protected in all of our shared examples. While there were opportunities for school staff to intervene to either prevent or rectify Black girls' humiliation and abuse, that intervention never occurred. A major takeaway from the anecdote-supported examples were the ways in which gendered-racial biases left Black girls' pretty much on their own.

Recommendations for middle grades

Seeing, naming, and reporting sexual harassment and gender-based violence

Perhaps because we are sometimes unable to clearly identify what sexual harassment and gender-based violence looks like amongst pre-teens, we have difficulty stopping it. For this reason, we recommend that school-wide training on recognizing sexual harassment and gender-based violence should be required for all school staff members. Creating safe spaces requires an "all hands on deck" approach (Miller & Mondschein, 2017). In other words, middle grade communities should invest in their collective power to build school-wide cultures that encourage and support the reporting of sexual harassment and gender-based violence. One strategy to help students feel protected is to create an awareness campaign. This can be as simple as a series of posters distributed school wide. Flyers and posters might let students know who they can contact if they are harassed or assaulted. The broader message is that adults in the building care.

California has emerged as a national role model for integrating healthy relationships into their sexual education curriculum, enacting the California Healthy Youth Act in 2016. The Act requires 7th- 12th graders to complete comprehensive sexual education courses that address "sexual harassment and assault, healthy relationships and body image" that "also positively affirm gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people" as a graduation requirement (Adams, 2016, para. 19). Many other states have shown how these lessons can also be integrated into students' reproductive health/health classes. Students should be able to identify what constitutes sexual harassment and gender-based violence in addition to how, when, why, and to whom to report such incidents. Since 2017, six states have introduced or passed requirements for the teaching of consent in their sex education K-12 curricula (Kamenetz, 2018). As of 2018, eleven states required such instruction surrounding consent, sexual assault and/or healthy relationships (Shapiro & Brown, 2018). We hope 39 more states will follow, and that districts and schools take up these societal mandates with thoughtful urgency.

Developing a school action plan

Though our literature review and book club discussion highlighted the ways in which sexual harassment and gender-based violence disproportionately impacts Black girls, ridding schools of its normalized culture is something beneficial to all students. We recognize that every school community is unique. During our book club dialogs, an accessibility issue to school policies and procedures was disclosed. Teachers were unaware of the school's action plan, if any, to combat in-school sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Our book club member, Dan, shared that he did not feel comfortable intervening when he observed bullying that was sexual in nature because he did not have the skillset to do so. How could he speak up in a way that would not further embarrass the student? Should he report the incident? What disciplinary action could he take against the student who made the comments? There were too many unknowns about the school's policy on sexual harassment and gendered violence. Having a clear action plan can help bridge this gap.

As an initial overview, middle grade administrators can turn to their individual districts to review what is already in place to protect students from and prevent sexual harassment. This includes an overview of policies and sanctions required for students who engage in these behaviors. Typically, these are available in student codes of conduct. Administrators may want to evaluate ways they can review this information with their students while brainstorming ways they can further raise awareness—moving toward a school culture that actively works to unnormalize sexual harassment and gender-based violence. Schools and school districts also have the legal responsibility to act on allegations of in-school sexual harassment and gender-based violence under Title IX (Sherer, 1993). Therefore, administrators should strongly consider serving as the school's Title IX officer/s, should the school not have a designated role. This person, or team, would keep track of formal reports and serve as the designated person/s a student can confidently talk to should they feel their rights have been violated.

Because of a national lack of robust and complete reporting, the complexities of in-school sexual harassment and gender-based violence can be largely unknown. In fact, an article released by AAUW revealed that two-thirds of U.S. public schools reported that there were zero incidents of sexual harassment or bullying (Yuen, 2017). We know this simply is not true. Additionally, the majority of data that does exist does not disaggregate by race and gender. The lack of school districts reporting diminishes the challenges faced by all students when it comes to these matters. It also prevents school and district officials from noticing disproportionality for specific demographics, hindering possible interventions. Under the leadership of an individual school administration team, enhanced reporting practices can be implemented to help their middle school staff better understand their school's climate toward harassment and violence.

Collaborating with nonprofit organizations and universities

Typically, when we think about sexual harassment and gendered violence training in educational settings, we look to college campuses. The Title IX of the Educational Amendments was established in 1972 to protect undergraduates against sex discrimination in education and in 1992, the Amendments were extended to include sexual assault and sexual harassment (ACLU, n.d.; National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 2019). Many universities have required all students and staff to participate in some sort of Title IX training and colleges and universities can be great partners for middle school leaders' development and delivery of developmentally appropriate middle grades student programming around the same issues. For example, The Green Dot training program was first used at the University of Kentucky in 2006 (Jacobson, 2018) and was eventually adapted as a pilot for high school audiences. According to Jacobson (2018), Green Dot was centered on changing college bystander culture. In one high school community, the adapted Green Dot program intervention resulted in a 50% decrease in the occurrences of sexual violence (Coker et al., 2017). Hopefully, with some modifications, university education tools can inspire similar middle grades education partnerships around sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Nonprofit organizations are also great resources. On a national level, platforms created by organizations like the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) have created robust downloadable tools such as #MeTooK12, which are teacher-friendly materials for supporting teen girls who have been sexually harassed (National Women's Law Center [NWLC], 2018). We found this site to be very helpful for teachers who wanted to implement immediate changes in their classrooms, while also giving them the language needed to encourage schoolwide transformations. Furthermore, we encourage educators and administrators to seek training support from local nonprofit organizations as well. If there are organizations in your area that provide staff and/or student training on sexual harassment and gendered violence, invest in having their trainers facilitate workshops for your school. Like the inclusive toolkits provided by the NWLC, we recommend choosing an organization that provides culturally competent training and is well-versed on the gendered-racial nuances of in-school sexual harassment and gender-based violence.

Conclusion

Leaning into the momentum of recent social movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo, middle grade communities can join the call for national systemic reconciliation by promoting safe spaces for Black girls to thrive. Morrison's (1970) Pecola prayed for blue eyes—the bluest eyes. Believing that her Blackness was the source of the racism and abuse she had been subjected to, she prayed to be White. The novel closes with the image of Pecola wandering the streets of Lorraine, Ohio talking out loud to herself. The narrator concludes, "We tried to see her without looking at her … not because we were frightened, but because we had failed her" (p. 204).

As we explained at the start of this article, among those things in which we believe profoundly is the notion that early adolescence is a distinct and critical developmental period. Every child deserves a childhood; every adolescent deserves a community and space that values that key developmental phase before adulthood begins in full. Importantly, we note that our advocacy for Black girls in the middle grades does not, should not, and must not come at the expense of advocacy for their classmates. With our colleagues across the nation, we advocate for awareness at the district, school, and classroom levels about sexual harassment and gender-based violence as it affects boys, girls, and gender-expansive youth in urban, rural, and suburban settings.

Harmful stereotypes and biases, conscious or subconscious, projected onto Black girls are social constructions that Black girls can potentially internalize. So too does the world around them. Thus, teachers and teacher-leaders must work to create and sustain academic, social, and emotional spaces of growth where trust and respect are accorded and received. Grounded in interdisciplinary scholarship and practice, we have shared a working outline of how middle grade communities might begin building safer environments for the Black girls in our middle grades classrooms because all students benefit when we cultivate school cultures of respect and consent. For Morrison's (1970) Pecola, "only a miracle could relieve her, she would never know her beauty. She would see only what there was to see: the eyes of other people" (p. 47). By courageously prioritizing the safety and well-being of the young adolescents we serve without looking away, with eyes wide open, our commitment and action must be deliberate, unwavering, and inclusive.

Disclosure statement

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