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Tiece M. Ruffin, Ph.D.

Education Activist and Teacher Educator

Who am I?

I'm a granddaughter of a North Carolina sharecropper born in Washington, DC, in the late 1970s. When I was born, Jimmy Carter was president and the U.S. was in a period of change. This change, a period of revisioning and transformation, was brought on by the social movements of the 1950s and 1960s. A major social institution, the U.S. Education System, experienced great strides during the 70s decade. For instance,

- Piaget wrote a book that popularized discovery-based teaching approaches (1970)
- the Indian Education Act was passed (1972)
- PARC and Mills cases expanded the rights of students with disabilities (1971, 1972)
- Title IX of the Education Amendments Act was passed (1972) to end sex discrimination in education, thus promoting gender equity
- the Children's Defense Fund was founded (1973) as a child advocacy organization
- Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act became law (1973) providing civil rights for people with disabilities
- the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the rights of English Language Learners to receive an education equal to their English-speaking peers in *Lau vs. Nichols* (1974)
- and PL-94-142 became federal law guaranteeing a free and appropriate public education to children with disabilities (1975).

Being a change agent was not a choice; I was born during a period of change, so change is inherent in me.

I'm a gun violence survivor who was shot in the leg three days before my 11th birthday. Kate Boo in a 1994 Washington Post article said, "*Her bloody sock sat for days on a living room table. Her slumber party was canceled. She turned 11 years old in an adjustable hospital bed. For an instant in 1988, Tiece Ruffin got snagged by the violence of the District's crack trade, catching a stray bullet in the leg during a shootout between rival dealers*". As the cliché goes, my story may have been told, but it's still being written.

I'm a mother to two Black boys who at four years old qualified for early entrance to kindergarten as children with extraordinary academic ability and maturity, and who qualified for gifted education through their public school's identification process in third grade. They obtained differentiated education plans with various service delivery options, learning environments, and content/process/product modifications. Wait, but does all of that *really* mean anything? In the education community there is a consensus of denied educational opportunities and grave disparities for Black males. The National Education Association's *Race Against Time: Educating Black Boys* (2011); Pedro Noguera's *Schooling for Resilience: Improving the Life Trajectory of Black and Latino Boys* (2014); and The Schott Foundation For Public Education's *Black Lives Matter: The Schott 50 State Report on Public Education and Black Males* (2015); all share devastating educational outcomes for Black males. For instance, Black males graduate from high school less than Latino and white males, are suspended more than Latino and white males, a lesser percentage of Black males earn a bachelor's degree than Latino and white males, and Black males have the lowest reading and math proficiency scores among Black, Latino, and white males. Graduation rates, suspension rates, postsecondary attainment, and academic achievement are lowest for Black males compared to their Latino and white counterparts. Ummm, so no, I cannot rest on my laurels, I must be a vigilant advocate! Parental advocacy in education is paramount in the pursuit of educational excellence for Black children today, and I am a parent advocate, also known as a lioness for my cubs and other children in my community.

I'm an academic, with a Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, specializing in special education. Against all odds, I persevered to become an educational scholar. In 1994, Kate Boo said, "*But in places where, as O'Donnell of the D.C. Police put it, 'there was zero quality of life . . . And inside the tiny houses are a few kids such as Tiece. . . . years after the bullet, she's not a casualty of the District's crack wars. She's a graduate of them'*". Even in so-called barren spaces, with toxic conditions, unique compositions grow. Here I am, alive, growing, and contributing for a more just society!

I am a leader and change-maker. As a young child in the elementary and middle grades, I walked toward the U.S. Capitol every day on my way to school in the Trinidad neighborhood of Northeast DC. Growing up in such a powerful and influential city with the White House, U.S. Capitol, and Supreme Court as the backdrop to your residential neighborhood was amazing! There was always a buzz in the city from influential leaders, change makers, and lawmakers from local DC government and all three branches of the federal government, executive, legislative, and judicial. I was reminded every day that *an individual* has the capacity to affect and impact lives. My hometown, the Nation's Capital, inspired me to work for the people. The calling of my life is to be a community servant, an influential leader, and change-maker in education, as a social reconstructionist dedicated to equity.

I'm a freedom fighter working to dismantle an oppressive and a structurally inequitable education system. I am a liberatory pedagogue who believes in the practice of education for liberation like Paulo Freire. When high school graduation rates for Black students in public schools are lower than their white, Hispanic, and Asian counterparts, and the opportunity gap is unabated, education equity in today's diverse and inclusive school is paramount. The work of my predecessors and contemporaries inspire and inform my practice. Freedom Fighters of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement brought injustices to light and worked tirelessly for justice. I stand on the shoulders of education giants such as Mary McLeod Bethune, Sarah Lawrence-Lightfoot, Marva

Collins, Gloria Ladson Billings, Geneva Gay, Lisa Delpit, James Banks, Christine Sleeter, Pedro Noguera, and Christopher Emdin. Education is a human right, not a privilege, and all deserve a high quality and equitable education in order to fully participate in a global society.

In 2016, Zoe Samudzi exclaimed, in her article by the same name, *we need a decolonized, not a 'diverse' education*. As a decolonial teacher educator and education advocate in a society riddled with issues of white supremacy and teacher education programs with an immense presence of whiteness, my work includes diverse and multiple voices with critical examination and reflection. James Banks' *Dimensions of Multicultural Education* and other scholarly works, Christine Sleeter's massive body of work, *The White Teachers I wish I never Had* article by Mia McKenzie, *Color Blindness, Unconscious Bias, and Student Achievement in Suburban Schools* by Justin Grinage, *Racial Microaggressions and African-American and Hispanic Students in Urban Schools: A Call for Culturally Affirming education; Yes, But How do We do It* by Gloria Ladson-Billings; and *For White Folks who Teach in the Hood and the Rest of Y'all Too* by Christopher Emdin are mainstays in my vast toolbox for sharing with **all** to create a more just, and equitable education.

Lastly, **I'm an indefatigable defender of human rights** as an education advocate. I have experience as a K-12 classroom teacher, school administrator, and fifteen years as a teacher educator. My professional experiences are deeply rooted in human services, diversity, social justice, cultural responsiveness, equity, and inclusion. As an advocate for excellence in education for learners with special needs and other diverse learners, I work as a social reconstructionist significantly engaged in social responsibility. My work in education as a teacher, advocate for children and youth with special needs, and teacher educator promotes a just society, challenges injustice, and values diversity. I seek to truly make a difference in our world and society by ensuring access and equal opportunity in education for children often pushed to the *margins* in society.

Who are you? Are you an advocate, freedom fighter, defender of human rights? Or are you part of the problem, maintaining and perpetuating the status quo? The time is now-- contribute, reconstruct, get involved in a social movement for a more just and equitable education system. Marian Wright Edelman reminds us, "If we think we have ours and don't owe any time or money or effort to help those left behind, then we are a part of the problem rather than the solution to the fraying social fabric that threatens all Americans."