Remove Systemic Barriers, Engage in Systemic Reform, and Implement Systemic Solutions: Transformative Justice, Good Teachers, and Identity Safe Classrooms

Tiece M. Ruffin

University of North Carolina Asheville

Preface: Black Ashevillians have always had a strong desire to invest in their children through the power of education. In an 1887 city school referendum, Black Asheville's pivotal vote provided the necessary support for the commencement of a tax-supported public school system for Black and white children in Asheville (Newman, 2019). This essay stands on the shoulders of giants—Mr. Isaac Dickson, Miss Mary Jane Dickson, Ms. Hester Walker Ford, Mr. Harrison B. Brown, Mr. Daniel C. Suggs, and Mr. Edward H. Lipscombe—trailblazers and pioneers who helped establish, manage, or teach in Asheville's new tax-supported public school system in 1888. Furthermore, this essay is in solidarity with those—past, present, and future—who believe in the power of an equitable and just education.

Background

Asheville is known as a top destination for many and is an award-winning city. Metropolitan Asheville has more than twenty accolades (posted on ExploreAsheville.com) highlighting award-winning restaurants, beer-city USA titles, craft beer mecca title, dog-friendliness, a mesmerizing music scene, and a top adventure-seeker destination, among others. However, 2019 was the year of attention on the opportunity gap in Asheville. Several news articles exposed Asheville's status as the city with the 5th largest achievement gap nationwide, and the largest racial achievement gap between Black and white students statewide for all of North Carolina's 115 school districts.

Asheville City Schools' worst-in-NC achievement, discipline gaps widen (Daffron, 2019a)

> *Two NC school districts with major racial achievement gaps seek solutions* (Scarbrough, 2019)

Asheville school board appointees on racial gap: dismantle 'broken' system, look locally (Burgess, 2019)

Goals, timeline lacking in program to narrow racial achievement gap (Daffron, 2019b)

It may have startled some that award-winning Asheville had this horrendous gap: a revelation in stark contrast to the tourist-oriented marketing and promotions that highlight and celebrate Asheville. Nonetheless, 2019 revealed stark realities beneath Asheville's decorated covering. Deep and persistent inequities contribute to lower educational achievement and attainment for certain groups, particularly Black children. It's a far cry from the promise and aspiration of education once held in 1887, when Black Ashevillians provided the necessary vote to support tax-supported public schools for Black and white students, albeit segregated and unequal. The power and promise of education deflate when systemic, institutional, and structural inequities are rampant.

In the spirit of self-determination as espoused by Marcus Garvey, the Africana Studies Program at UNC Asheville and community organization, Expanding Equity in our Schools, with support from a community member, faith-based organizations, and education non-profit, sponsored a symposium on closing the opportunity gap on September 14, 2019. The symposium featured local and regional African American education scholars and community facilitators. The community symposium centered African American voices and explored best practices that promote Black children thriving in schools. This essay highlights practices featured in the thirty-minute symposium presentation by Dr. Tiece Ruffin. Furthermore, it is situated in her expertise and experience as an African American teacher educator for 15 years, as a parent of Black males currently attending local public schools, and work as an educational consultant domestically and globally addressing issues of inclusion and equity. The central question to this brief exposition is, "What are some best practices that support Black children thriving in school?" This includes how school discipline is imposed, access to good teachers, and "identity safe" classrooms as select practices that remove systemic barriers, engage in systemic reform, and create the systemic changes that support Black children thriving in school. They are not exhaustive, but are useful in supporting students' agency in flourishing in school.

These practices seek to transform and change, not retrofit, and are centered in equity and justice. Typically, educational reform involves retrofitting, or adding to existing systems to increase effectiveness or efficiency. This may be viewed as an appendage rather than fundamentally changing or transforming the system. Think about it: Have we really optimized public education with retrofitting? The gaps seem wider and wider. We have "added on" to enhance older systems, but do we have better results? We do not. Instead of adding on, this essay proposes approaches for systemic transformation, equity, and justice. These approaches are not novel, they are seven to twenty-five years or so old; however, some have been debased, lowered in quality from their original intent and explication, and others should be studied for understanding and intentionally implemented with fidelity. This essay amplifies and reiterates practices and implores school districts and teacher preparation programs to use intentionally with fidelity and accountability.

Racial Academic Performance Gaps Persist: The Need for Systemic Solutions

Racial academic performance gaps persist between Black and white students in Asheville City and Buncombe County school districts. For example, 2018-2019 data featured in the Racial Equity Report Card by the Southern Coalition for Social Justice (2020a) reported that white students in grades 3-8 were 5.6 times more likely to score career and college ready on final exams than Black students in Asheville City Schools. This means that only 12.6% of Black students in grades 3-8 scored college and career ready on end-of-grade exams, while 70.3% of white children scored college and career ready on end-of-grade exams. The Buncombe County Schools 2018-2019 district profile (Southern Coalition for Social Justice, 2020b) indicates that its white students in grades 3-8 were 2.4 times more likely to score career and college ready on final exams than its Black students. So, 23.1% of Black students in grades 3-8 scored college and career ready on end-of-grade exams, while 55.7% of white children did so. For grades 9-12, the gaps are no different. They are expansive for both school districts, with the percentage of white students faring better in scoring college and career ready on end-of-course exams than Black students.

General end-of-grade (EOG) and end-of-course (EOC) gaps are deep and persistent between Black and white students, but so are gaps in particular academic content areas. For instance, in reading, an area considered a cornerstone of education, Asheville City Schools and Buncombe County Schools show an ever-widening racial academic performance gap in reading performance between Black and white students. For Asheville City Schools, 2018-2019 district profile data indicates that 78% of Black children are not proficient, and are below grade level, in comparison to 17% of white children that are not proficient in English Language Arts/Reading Performance. For Buncombe County Schools, 2018-2019 district profile data indicates that 69% of Black children are not proficient, and are below grade level, in comparison to 34% of white children that are below grade and not proficient in English Language Arts/ Reading Performance.

It is disappointing and unacceptable for any child to perform below grade level; however, when exacerbated by race, everyone should be alarmed. Reading is vital, since high literacy rates are often related to political, social, health, educational, and economic benefits. Also, when individuals lack literacy skills, they are unable to fully engage in their globally competitive 21st Century society. Illiteracy is often connected to social inequalities, such as poverty (GEMRT, 2005) and other inequities; therefore, literacy is considered central or foundational to an equitable society and considered a cornerstone of all education (International Literacy Association, n.d.).

Gaps, gaps, and gaps—what do they tell us about education? Student learning? Academic success? About students thriving or not thriving? Why does this data matter?

> Some may say, "Who cares? This gap is only showing the difference between standardized test scores of the highest achieving subgroup and lowest achieving subgroup." But according to the National Education Association, "Test score gaps often lead to longer-term gaps, including high school and college completion and the kinds of jobs students secure as adults." It's simple—gaps now lead to gaps later, which mean inequalities and disparities. Since the lower achieving subgroups tend to be Black students and other racial/ethnic minorities, English language learners, students with

disabilities, and students from low-income families, we continue to perpetuate inequity if we do nothing (Ruffin, 2015).

Despite the fact that standardized test scores have racist beginnings (Rosales, 2018) and are often ripe with cultural biases, they are deemed important in education as they are seen as key performance indicators and often used to make important educational decisions. Rightfully so, Racial Equity Report Cards by the Southern Justice Coalition for Social Justice (2020a & 2020b) cautions the use of these scores:

> While standardized test scores are not a reliable measure of true ability for all students, they serve as the basis for many important decisions (e.g. course placement, grade promotion, identification as academically or intellectually gifted). Thus, low test scores can negatively impact a student's overall academic opportunities and outcomes. (academic achievement section)

The data presented in 2019 illustrates the stark academic performance disparity between white and Black students, and deep systemic racial inequities operating within our local school districts (community). However, this is not new. Asheville City and Buncombe County Schools have faced major racial academic performance gaps and inequities between white and Black students for decades. Both systems have attempted to address these gaps through various interventions, supports, programs, and initiatives, but racial academic performance gaps persist unabated.

Recent media interest and the plethora of data available highlight statistics and the problem, but what about centering best practices that support Black children thriving in school—fixing systems, not kids?

Remove Systemic Barriers, Implement Systemic Solutions: A Few Best Practices

"Policies and practices that favor incarceration over education do us all a grave injustice" (Elias, 2013, p. 39)

Discipline

It is widely known that current school disciplinary practices increase the school to prison pipeline, mass incarceration, and are centered on retributive justice. The National School Boards Association highlights 'how school discipline is imposed' as an area that must address equity, as it has an impact on student learning (Barth, 2016).

Retributive justice implies punishment. Zehr (2011), distinguished professor of restorative justice at Eastern Mennonite University, explains that retributive justice seeks vengeance for a wrongful act and operates along these three questions:

- What rule has been broken?
- Who is to blame?
- What punishment do they deserve? (section I. Retributive approach)

What does this look like in a school setting?

<table>
<tr><td>Case Scenario</td></tr>
<tr><td>

One day, X threw a ball at Z outside during break. Teachers asked X to stop. However, X threw another ball at Z during outside 'recess'. Teachers informed X to stop again and other kids asked X to stop as well. As the class proceeded inside, X threw a ball at Z again, and this time, it almost hit a teacher's head. A teacher told X to stop once again and that X would possibly receive a referral for such behavior. X and Z arrived to class unsupervised. X confronted Z, and Z called X stupid. X pushed Z, and Z pushed X. Z went to the bathroom and when he returned, the teacher asked, "did something happen?" Both boys confessed what happened (remember a teacher was not in the room when X and Z pushed each other). X and Z's incident did not escalate to a 'fight', they stopped on their own, without adult intervention. Both African-American boys were given out of school suspension.

</td></tr>
</table>

In this brief case scenario, two middle school Black boys (6th graders) received a one-day out of school suspension. They were punished; retributive justice was meted out.

Black children thriving in school requires *transformative* justice. Zehr (2011) frames transformative justice as justice that is beyond individual wrongdoing and individual events; it addresses the conditions that contribute to and shape wrongdoing; seeking roots of the conflict and what structures need to change; along with considering the need for transformation of systems that create harm. It operates along these three questions:

- What social circumstances produced/promoted the harmful behavior?
- What structural similarities exist between this incident and others like it?
- What measures could prevent further occurrences? (section III. Transformative approach)

In the case scenario presented, transformative justice might include the following:

a system analysis by a school team to discover the underlying conditions that shape and contribute to the "wrongdoing" (teacher and student level).

A system analysis may reveal implicit racial bias by teachers and disciplinary code of conducts and consequences in dire need of reimagination and transformation. This analysis requires a look at individual biases and system level work. When unexamined teacher bias intersects with racial bias, gender bias, and implicit bias, it results in teachers more harshly disciplining Black students. Furthermore, a system analysis may reveal that the conflict is due in part to unhealthy relationships and social systems in the school and wider community. How are relationships fostered between students, especially when students live in different communities and are not friends? Teambuilding and relationship building are necessary for caring and positive learning environments and they require intentional, explicit fostering for positive student to student relationships. Classrooms are learning communities, and they cannot function with attention to 'academic' content only; time and attention must be given to establishing and sustaining positive

relationships. The root cause of the conflict may be due to poor interpersonal relationships between students (no established relationship), students struggling with issues of masculinity (i.e. traditional American norms of aggression and toughness), or difficulty with communicating with people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Schools should not relegate topics like the gender socialization of boys and girls, masculinity, toxic masculinity, interpersonal communication and competence, white privilege, colorism, and the like, to the hidden curriculum. It should be acknowledged, examined, and addressed intentionally as they are firmly rooted in our society, thus social functioning and cultural norms. All in all, social circumstances should be analyzed and addressed, rather than concealed with beratement and punishment of students for misbehavior. Punishment is deficit-based, only considers the students, and takes no action for addressing structures, systems, policies, and social circumstances related to the 'misbehavior.'

Transformational justice engages at the individual level *and* at the level of social structures and institutional policies (Zehr, 2011). Ultimately, it involves a metamorphosis of broader social systems in ways that help to prevent the occurrence and re-occurrence of harmful incidents (Zehr, 2011).

In the case scenario above with X and Z, the different approaches to justice unfold as follows:

Retributive Justice	Restorative Justice + Transformative Justice
*One day out-of-school suspension	*Conduct an analysis of discipline for the grade level? What are the root causes of discipline inequities for that grade level? What tool did you use to examine? *Examine teacher bias and how it intersects with the racial bias, gender bias, and implicit bias that played a role in the incident (interview teacher and student; examine teacher referrals). The analysis may reveal implicit racial bias by teachers and disciplinary code of conduct and consequences in dire need of revision. Take the time, don't rush! *Facilitate an interpersonal, restorative conversation (circle) between the boys, such as peer mediation or student conference and reconciliation meeting to de-escalate and repair. * Build new or better relationships between students, i.e. examine team building or relationship building activities for 6th grade, such as explicit role-plays and activities to practice working together with new and diverse people, building communication skills, or other ways to get to know new people and establish positive interpersonal relationships. *Intentionally address topics like gender socialization, colorism, 'acting white,' and the like, in classroom spaces, rather than relegating them to the hidden curriculum.

Abandon retributive justice and intentionally use and hold individuals and the system accountable for using transformative justice. Dr. Maisha Winn, co-founder and co-director of the Transformative Justice in Education Center at University of California Davis reminds us in the book *Justice on Both Sides* (2018) to think restoratively and create transformative learning spaces.

Good Teachers

"If we are to close the achievement gap completely, we must address current inequities . . . access to good teachers . . ." (Barth, 2016, p. 3).

Teachers are important figures in ensuring equity. CPE 2009, as cited in Barth 2016, reported that good teachers have more influence on student learning than any other school factor. Moreover, the impact of high-performing teachers has been shown to be similar regardless of school characteristics, making teacher quality a major element in equity plans (Reform Support Network, 2015). Debates about teacher quality are abound in education. Rather than spending our time and energy on that debate, let's simply ensure that Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC) are not disproportionately taught by ineffective, out-of-field, or inexperienced teachers.

A good teacher for Black children understands and masters culturally relevant, culturally responsive, and culturally sustaining teaching practices. A prominent Black scholar, Kevin Cokley (2006) noted that "culturally irrelevant curricula and culturally insensitive teachers combine to negatively impact the intrinsic motivation and academic identity of African American students" (p. 137). In contrast, culturally responsive teachers are "student-centered, eliminate barriers to learning and achievement, and open doors for culturally different students to reach their potential" (Ford, 2010, p. 50). In 2018, Au echoed these sentiments in a chapter titled, "Racial Justice is Not a Choice," in *Rethinking Schools' Teaching for Black Lives*:

"Low income and kids of color are tested more; … don't have multicultural, anti-racist curriculum made available to them because those areas are not on the tests; and lose opportunities for culturally relevant instruction because the tests tend to inhibit processed-based, student-centered instruction in favor of rote memorization" (p. 247).

To thrive in school, Black children deserve teachers that use culturally relevant pedagogy (Gloria Ladson Billings), culturally responsive teaching (Geneva Gay), and culturally sustaining pedagogy (Django Paris). Gloria Ladson Billings (2011) describes culturally relevant pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning rooted in "salient elements of teacher thinking", which include social contexts about the students, curriculum, and instruction. Additionally, culturally relevant pedagogy consists of distinct components: academic achievement, cultural competence, and sociopolitical consciousness. Gay (2010) describes it as "using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them" (p. 31). Essentially, culturally responsive teaching is an approach to teaching and learning that acknowledges and utilizes student differences as strengths in the learning process. Paris (2012) describes culturally sustaining pedagogy, a practice that builds upon and is an alternative to culturally relevant and responsive practices, as:

"more than responsive of or relevant to the cultural experiences and practices of young people—it requires that they support young people in sustaining the cultural and linguistic competence of their communities while simultaneously offering access to dominant cultural competence. Culturally sustaining pedagogy, then, has as its explicit goal supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers. That is, culturally sustaining pedagogy seeks to perpetuate and foster—to sustain—linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of the democratic project of schooling" (p. 95).

Culturally relevant and responsive teaching practices have been around for almost three decades, and many have cited them as important in the preparation of teachers to effectively teach all students (Gay, 2000; Foster, 1997; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1999). A report by the Albert Shanker Institute (2015) recommended, "Particular attention needs to be paid to providing adequate mentoring, support and training in culturally responsive practices to novice teachers—of all races and ethnicities—working in the challenging conditions of high-poverty de facto racially segregated schools" (p. 3).

Critical race theorists in education (Hayes & Juarez, 2012) have called for cultural responsiveness and defined it in this manner: "culturally responsive pedagogy as an approach to teaching and learning that addresses the sociopolitical context of white supremacy within education and society over time while simultaneously fostering students' abilities to achieve high levels of academic success and cultural competence" (p. 4). Critical race theorists view cultural responsiveness as best practice against white racial domination and white supremacy and necessary in teacher preparation programs for teachers to be effective with all children, especially Black, indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

These good teachers should not be deemed as "heroic isolates"; "saviors or charismatic mavericks" (Ladson-Billings, 2011, p.33). Teaching should not be simplified, as it is multifaceted and complex, requiring intellectual resolve or acumen in teaching and learning theories, philosophies, and practices in order to support the needs of a variety of learners. Good teachers resist white racial domination and white supremacy in their teaching. They use culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogies. They promote asset-based teaching with culturally relevant curricula to support Black children thriving in school. This is absolutely necessary as Goe, Bell, & Little (2008) posited that cultural responsiveness is both fundamental and imperative to effective teaching.

Good, informed teaching, based on reasoning, requires culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining practices. Teacher preparation programs and school systems should systematically and explicitly coach, support, train, and hold pre-service and in-service teachers accountable with evidences, i.e. products that demonstrate understanding of best practices. Furthermore, teachers should connect the academic success of Black students to the success of their own teaching. Examine their practice (evaluating the effectiveness of their instruction), without assuming the failure or shortcoming of the student, to enhance their teaching.

In the spirit of cultural responsiveness, here are some questions I might ask my Black sons' teachers:

- Do you hold him to high expectations? How? Please explain.
- Do you view him as capable? Please give an example.
- How do you recognize his strengths and support and build his skills?
- Are you aware of and do you understand our home culture and values?
- How does teaching and learning in your class address inequities in their experience, their peers, or society at large?
- Are curricula and learning materials culturally supportive (i.e., validate students' cultural identity; issues and perspectives included from his cultural background; readings about the cultures of the students)? Explain.
- Are class texts (print and other media) diverse, inclusive and aligned to anti-bias education as espoused by [Teaching Tolerance's Reading Diversity Lite (Teacher's Edition): A tool for selecting diverse texts](#) ?
- How do you embrace student-centered, culturally responsive, antiracist pedagogy to enhance students' learning and success in school? Explain with examples.
- In focusing on academic success, is the classroom a caring learning community? How was that established and how is it maintained?
- What concrete actions do you engage in to counter white supremacy? Essentially, how does an anti-racist education manifest in your classroom?
- What does anti-racist teaching mean to you? Describe how you enact anti-racist teaching.
- Is there a positive student-teacher relationship? How are you fostering that?
- How do you connect to students? Describe your method of nurturing connectedness.
- Do you use a one-size-fits-all approach, or do you continually assess, monitor and vary your strategies for him? Please describe.
- How is critical thinking embedded in your teaching and learning process?
- Please describe how you use higher levels of thinking, more than "recall, identify, list," but "classify, discuss, explain, solve, interpret, demonstrate, compare, contrast, examine, appraise, design, construct, investigate," and the like?

Identity Safe Classrooms

"Over the years, I heard other students say, My parents don't want me to be a statistic" (Cohn-Vargas, 2018, p. 110)

D.M. Steele & Cohn-Vargas (2013), as cited in Cohn-Vargas (2018), defined identity safe classrooms as places where "teachers strive to ensure that students feel that their social identity is an asset rather than a barrier to success in the classroom and that they are welcomed, supported, and valued whatever their background" (p. 112). How do teachers ensure that a Black student's social identity is an asset rather than a barrier to learning? As responsive teachers, how do they assess and support student learning using diverse pedagogies and strategies? How do they make sure Black students are welcomed, supported, and valued? Are schools and classrooms beacons of identity safe spaces for Black children and youth? Or, are harm and affliction lurking in these spaces? These spaces are damaging when there is a *lack of* a) centering student voices; b) teaching with understanding and self-efficacy; c) responsiveness to student affect, interests, and readiness; d) scaffolding; e) relevant, authentic, and meaningful curriculum and learning experiences; f) cooperative spaces; g) inviting and bringing students' lives into the

classroom; h) rigor and high expectations; and i) positive student-teacher and student-student relationships.

Identity safe classrooms evolved as a rectifier to the pervasive psychology of stigma tropes and stereotype threat. Psychology of stigma tropes emphasized intellectual inferiority and negative stereotypes about one's social identity, or membership in a social group, like race. C.M. Steele & Aronson (1995), as cited in Cohn-Vargas (2018), defined stereotype threat as "being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group" (p. 110). Stereotype threat is hazardous to one's functioning and is often thought of as one of the most detrimental effects of student internalized intellectual inferiority. Cohn-Vargas (2018) posits, "When people feel their social group is negatively stereotyped, worrying that they might exemplify it diminishes performance—even if they do not believe the stereotype is true" (p. 110-111). The fallacious stereotype of Black intellectual inferiority to that of whites has been found to lower the academic performance of Black students. Research has shown that when students feel at risk of fulfilling a negative stereotype, their school performance suffers.

Cohn-Vargas (2018) highlights identity safe classrooms as the antidote or remedy to stereotype threat. Domains of identity safe classrooms are child-centered teaching, cultivating diversity as a resource, building effective and positive classroom relationships, and creating caring environments. Since stereotyping diminishes performance, identity safe classrooms and their domains offer best practice in providing positive, caring, affirming, rigorous (high levels of thinking and questioning), and responsive learning environments where students are centered within the classroom and self-efficacy and agency are important.

Claude Steele and Dorothy Steele recommend affirming messages in countering stereotype threat: "to counter stereotype threat, students need to be inoculated with messages that validate them not in spite of but because of their social identities" (as cited in Cohn-Vargas, 2018, p. 112). A few messages I've used to validate my Black sons on a daily basis through conversation, morning affirmation time, when they're attempting new tasks, when something is difficult, or just because I want to affirm and support them in the unknown of the day and life in general:

- You're a brilliant Black boy (inspired by Betty Bynum's & Joshua Drummond's *I'm a Brilliant Little Black Boy!* book)
- You're young, gifted and Black!
- You're a confident King (inspired by Jasmine Furr's book, *I am a Confident King*)
- You are a champion that can change the world!
- You're a creator and innovator.
- You are loved (inspired by Nikki Giovanni's book, *I Am Loved* & Grace Byers', *I Am Enough*)
- You can do hard things (inspired by Gabi Garcia's book, *I Can Do Hard Things*)
- You are a gift to the world
- You can be anything you want to be
- You are a descendant of people with a rich intellectual tradition (inspired by Patricia and Fredrick McKissack's book, *Royal Kingdoms of Ghana, Mali, and Songhay: Life in Medieval Africa)*
- Like yourself for who you are and who you are becoming

- You are capable, confident
- You have gifts and talents (inspired by Alex Pate's *Being You* book and Pat Miller's *Remarkably You*)
- You are incisive

Conclusion

Alice Walker, National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize Winner, exclaimed, "We are the ones we have been waiting for" (Walker, 2006). As an African American teacher educator for fifteen years, as a parent, and as an educational consultant, I understand racial inequities in education and have insights on change. This essay highlights three practices from a thirty-minute presentation on September 14, 2019 in Asheville, NC at a Symposium on closing the opportunity gap, featuring local and regional African American education scholars. I've identified *some* of what we need (transformational justice, good teachers, and identity safe classrooms), and *now implore us* to be unrelenting in our quest for educational justice. Again, these approaches are not novel, they are known and familiar, spanning seven to twenty-five years in education scholarship. However, some have been corrupted or *bastardized* from their original intent and framework by educational personnel and systems, and others require deep study and intentional implementation with fidelity. This essay amplifies and reiterates the practices and implores school districts and teacher preparation programs to use them intentionally with fidelity and accountability in supporting Black children thriving in school. We cannot continue to corrupt frameworks and have little understanding of practices if we're to truly disrupt white supremacy in education and dismantle racial inequities in education. Equity is not a buzzword; not a trendy word for optics and aesthetics. Dismantling structural and institutional racism and white supremacy in the educational sphere requires real work, real actions! As we vehemently engage in educational justice, remember that African American children are descendants of people with a rich intellectual tradition. It's important to remember Black children as described in Nina Simone's 1970 song, "To be Young, Gifted and Black":

To be young, gifted and Black,
Oh what a lovely precious dream
To be young, gifted and Black,
Open your heart to what I mean
In the whole world you know
There are billion boys and girls
Who are young, gifted and Black,
And that's a fact!

References

Albert Shanker Institute. (2015). The State of Teacher Diversity in American Education. https://www.shankerinstitute.org/resource/teacherdiversity

Au, W. (2018). Racial justice is not a choice. In Watson, D., Hagopian, J., & Au, W. (Eds.), *Teaching for Black lives* (p. 243- 250). Rethinking Schools.

Barth, P. (2016). *Educational Equity: What does it mean? How do we know when we reach it?* Center for Public Education, National School Boards Association. https://www.nsba.org/-/media/NSBA/File/cpe-educational-equity-research-brief-january-2016.pdf?la=en&hash=A0F139B97D13C589CE00F186E594BEF1C3396F93

Burgess, J. (2019, March 27). Asheville school board appointees on racial gap: dismantle 'broken' system, look locally. Asheville Citizen Times. Retrieved from https://www.citizen-times.com/story/news/local/2019/03/27/asheville-schools-appointees-racial-gap-dismantle-broken-system/3280117002/

Cokley, K. (2006). The impact of racialized schools and racist (mis)education on African American students' academic identity. In M. G. Constantine & D. W. Sue (Eds.), *Addressing Racism: Facilitating Cultural Competence in Mental Health and Educational Settings* (p. 127–144). John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Cohn-Vargas, B. (2018). Identity safety as an antidote to stereotype threat. In Moore, E., Michael, A., & Penick-Parks, M. W. (Eds.), *The Guide for White Women who Teach Black Boys* (pp. 110-120). Corwin.

Daffron, V. (2019a, January 31). Asheville City Schools' worst-in-NC achievement, discipline gaps widen. Mountain Xpress. Retrieved from https://mountainx.com/news/asheville-city-schools-worst-in-nc-achievement-discipline-gaps-widen/

Daffron, V. (2019b, May 25). Goals, timeline lacking in program to narrow racial achievement gap. Mountain Xpress. Retrieved from https://mountainx.com/news/still-no-plan-for-addressing-worst-in-state-disparities-for-ashevilles-black-students/

Elias, M. (2013, April). The school-to-prison pipeline. *Teaching Tolerance Magazine, 43,* 38-40. https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2013/the-school-to-prison-pipeline

Ford, D. (2010). Multicultural issues: Culturally responsive classrooms: Affirming culturally different gifted students. *Gifted Child Today*, *33*(1), 5-53.

Foster, M. (1997). *Black teachers on teaching*. New York: New Press.

Gay, G. (2000). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gay, G. (2010). *Culturally responsive teaching: Theory, research, and practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Goe, L., Bell, C., & Little, O. (2008). Approaches to evaluating teacher effectiveness: A research synthesis. Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED521228)

Global Education Monitoring Report Team (GEMRT). (2005) *Education for all: Literacy for life.* EFA Global Monitoring Report, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000141639

Hayes, C. & Juarez, B. (2012). There is no culturally responsive teaching spoken here: A critical race perspective. *Democracy & Education 20*(1), 1-14.

International Literacy Association (n.d.). *Literacy: Transforming Lives for the Better. International Literacy Association.* https://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/resource-documents/literacy-infographic.pdf?sfvrsn=e372ac8e_4

Ladson-Billings, G. (1994). *The dreamkeepers: Successful teachers of African American children*. San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (1999). Preparing teachers for diversity: Historical perspectives, current trends, and future directions. In L. Darling-Hammond & G. Sykes (Eds.), *Teaching as the Learning Profession: Handbook of Policy and Practice* (pp. 86–123). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Ladson-Billings, G. (2011). Yes, but how do we do it? In J. Landsman, & C. W. Lewis (Eds). *White Teachers, Diverse Classrooms, 2nd edition, (pp. 33-46*). Sterling: Stylus.

Newman, J. (2019, September 5). *Part I: Blacks vote for public education, win a separate but unequal place in the new school system.* North Carolina Room at Pack Memorial Library. https://packlibraryncroom.com/2019/09/05/ashevilles-first-city-schools-for-Black-students/

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally sustaining pedagogy: A needed change in stance, terminology, and practice. *Educational Researcher 41*(3*), 93-97.*

Reform Support Network, Promoting More Equitable Access to Effective Teachers: Problem and Root Causes, March 2015, US Department of Education.

Ruffin, T. (2015, March 13). *Let's thwart structural racism in our schools*. *The Asheville Citizen Times.*https://www.citizen-times.com/story/opinion/contributors/2015/03/13/thwart-structural-racism-schools/70263738/

Scarbrough, I. (2019, February 21). Two NC school districts with major racial achievement gaps   seek solutions. Carolina Public Press. Retrieved from https://carolinapublicpress.org/28562/two-nc-school-districts-with-major-racial-achievement-gaps-seek-solutions/

Simone, N. (1970). To be young, gifted and Black [song]. On Black Gold [Album]. RCA Records.

Southern Coalition for Social Justice. (2020a). *Asheville City Schools Racial Equity Report Card 2020*. Southern Coalition for Social Justice. https://www.southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-RERC-Asheville-Cityh.pdf

Southern Coalition for Social Justice. (2020b). *Buncombe County Schools Racial Equity Report Card 2020*. Southern Coalition for Social Justice. https://www.southerncoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/2019-RERC-Buncombeh.pdf

Walker, A. (2006). *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting for: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness*. The New Press.

Winn, M. T. (2018). *Justice on both sides: Transforming education through restorative justice*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Zehr, H. (2011). Restorative or transformative justice? *Zehr Institute for Restorative Justice Blog*. https://emu.edu/now/restorative-justice/2011/03/10/restorative-or-transformative-justice/

Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Tiece M. Ruffin, University of North Carolina Asheville, email: truffin@unca.edu .