

## **White Teachers as a Risk Factor in the Healthy Development of Black Youth**

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Asheville City Schools is a local school district nestled in the beautiful mountains of Asheville, North Carolina (NC). ACS has the largest disparity in academic achievement between Black and white students in the state of NC (North Carolina Department School Report Cards (NCSRC), n.d.). This disparity has grown larger since ACS launched an equity initiative using the Integrated Comprehensive System (ICS) to address the gap in 2017 (Asheville City Schools (ACS), n.d.). ACS is well-resourced, spending 36% more per pupil than the state average; yet, it still has these appalling gaps (ACS, 2020; NCDPI, n.d.). This begs the question of why ACS has such atrocious outcomes for its Black students. Arguments supporting deficit-based answers to this disparity are rooted in fallacious ideas about the inherent intellectual and cultural inferiority of Black youth. These arguments contend that poor academic achievement is due to the students' alleged cognitive and motivational deficits, yet fail to examine the institutional structures and inequitable schooling environments meant to exclude Black youth from learning (Valencia, 2012).

While 18% of ACS students are Black, 92% percent of teachers in the ACS district are white, and less than 7% of ACS teachers are Black (NCDPI, n.d.). Even while there are three times more teacher's assistants that are Black, white teachers are still the majority in this case, with 74% of teacher's assistants being white. Despite claims of colorblindness, white teachers, like the rest of society, are socialized to the prevailing attitudes shaped by the political powers of the status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Harro, 2018). Yet, we have not looked at the role of white teachers in perpetuating inequitable outcomes and the potential harm they are causing their Black students.

### **Racial Discrimination and Behavioral Health**

Racial discrimination is defined as the unjust treatment of individuals considered to be of racial and ethnic minoritized groups. Black people report higher levels of racial discrimination than other racialized groups (Assari, Moazen-Zadeh, Caldwell & Zimmerman, 2017). Racial discrimination is intricately related to poorer mental health and has a significant association with a higher risk of behavioral health problems (Brody et al., 2014; Chapman et al., 2004; Landrine & Klonoff, 1996; Paradies et al., 2015; Williams & Mohammed, 2009). Existing research shows that behavioral health problems faced in childhood and adolescence can have serious negative

consequences on a person's quality of life (Albert, Slopen, & Williams, 2013; Hawkins et al., 2015; Jenson & Bender, 2014; Ogundele, 2018; Williams & Mohammed, 2009; Woolf, 2008). Therefore, it is crucial to understand and explore the effects of the racial discrimination Black students ages 3 to 18-years, referred to here as Black youth, experience in schools during their preschool through high school years (PreK-12) and its relationship to the development of behavioral health problems.

The racial discrimination Black youth experience in schools is a part of systemic violence embedded in the ideas of white supremacy, which is founded on the belief that Black people are morally, phenotypically, and intellectually inferior to their white counterparts (Vesely-Flad, 2017; Delpit, 2014; Allen & Liou, 2019). White supremacy is a historical problem that perpetuates a system of institutional power that advances white people based on the exploitation and oppression of people of color by white people (Allen & Liou, 2019; Vesely-Flad, 2017). One of the many ways that white supremacy is enforced in the United States' education system is through the racial bias of white teachers. The racialized actions of white teachers are central to the ideological and material construction of white supremacy in schools, and reinforce inequitable conditions that present as the "achievement gap" (Allen & Liou, 2019; Delpit, 2014; Unnever, Cullen & Barnes, 2016; Vesely-Flad, 2017).

### **White Teachers as a Risk Factor in the Healthy Development of Black Youth**

Having a white teacher as a risk factor in the development of behavioral health problems in Black youth receives little scholarly attention. Risk factors are characteristics that increase the likelihood that an individual develops a behavioral health problem. Behavioral health problems are behaviors that undermine an individual's mental or physical well-being. Behavioral health problems have significant negative impacts on rates of economic independence, morbidity, and mortality (Hawkins et al., 2015).

Such behaviors include anxiety and depression; violence and aggressive behavior; self-inflicted injury and suicide; risky sexual behaviors; obesity; drug use; delinquent behavior and dropping out of school (Hawkins et al., 2015). Behavioral health problems experienced in childhood and adolescence can take a heavy toll over a lifetime (GCSW, 2019). Yet, more than 30 years of scientific evidence shows that behavioral health problems can be prevented (Hawkins et al., 2015; Woolf, 2008).

### **White Teachers' Racial Bias**

Teachers spend a great deal of time with their students and control and decide students' grades, academic track, and behavioral evaluations (Hinojosas & Moras, 2009). Our society promotes the belief that teachers are compassionate heroes whose efforts positively affect the lives of students (McEvoy, 2014). Unfortunately, this narrative proves overwhelmingly false in respect to Black youth.

A heft of scholarly studies show that many white teachers hold negative stereotypes about Black youth, think of Black youth as deficient and delinquent, and feel uncertain about their ability to teach these students (Ahlquist, 1991; Avery & Walker, 1993; Bollin & Finkel, 1995; Delpit, 2014; Douglas, et al., 2008; Henze, Lucas & Scott, 1998; King & Howard, 2000; Lawrence, 1997; McIntyre, 1997; Matias & Zembylas, 2014; Sleeter, 1992). These racially biased assumptions corrupt the teacher's role of educator and exerts measurable psychological harm on

the Black youth these teachers are charged to serve and nurture (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Battey et al., 2018; Graybill, 1997; Hyland, 2005; Matias et al., 2014; McEvoy, 2014; Unnever, Cullen, & Barnes, 2016).

The racial biases of white teachers are enacted in various ways on Black youth and include but are not limited to: lowered academic expectations, lowered identification of Black students as gifted, negative racial stereotyping, higher disciplinary referral, expulsion and suspension rates for minor misbehaviors, and more highly charged interactions with Black students (Battey et al., 2018; Priest et al., 2018; Hinojosa & Moras, 2009, Delpit, 2014; Matias et al., 2014; Quereshi & Okonofua, 2017). For the 2017-18 school year, Black youth made up 20% of the ACS district's student population. Yet, these same students made up 64% percent of its disciplinary referrals and 68% of reported short-term suspensions (SCSJ, 2020). Additionally, Black youth were referred to law enforcement 13 times more than their white counterparts, who have the lowest referrals of all racial groups (North Carolina School Report Cards, n.d.).

These experiences Black youth face with their white teachers creates stress and trauma that can result in internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Assari & Caldwell, 2018; Assari, Moghani Lankarani & Caldwell, 2017; Chae et al., 2012; Hyland, 2005; Liu et al., 2016). Internalizing behaviors are comprised of internally-focused symptoms including fear, anxiety, sadness and depression, somatic complaints, and social withdrawal (Willner, Gatzke-Kopp, & Bray, 2016). Externalizing behaviors are comprised of externally focused behavioral symptoms including attention problems, hyperactivity, aggression, conduct problems, and oppositionality (Willner, Gatzke-Kopp, & Bray, 2016). Thus, the racial bias that white teachers exhibit with their Black students racially discriminates against these students, leading these students to possibly display behaviors that white teachers then punish them for. This vicious cycle has negative effects on Black youth's mental and physical health, while greatly limiting access to academic opportunities that will promote a higher quality of life.

Adding to the complexity of the issue is that studies show that white teachers have negative emotions around talking about race, making them unable to engage with issues pertaining to race (Allen & Liou, 2019; Matias et al., 2014; Matias, Henry, & Darland, 2017; Picower, 2009). However, the literature shows that these negative emotions are not borne of feelings of guilt or embarrassment around the devastating history of whiteness. Instead, these emotions are firmly rooted in maintaining power (Matias, Henry & Darland, 2017; Picower, 2009). Thus, the inability of white teachers to discuss issues of racial inequity maintains their racial power thereby reinforcing school spaces that are traumatizing for Black youth (Matias, Henry & Darland, 2017).

## **Addressing the Issue**

It is important to note that the Black community in Asheville has continuously endeavored to end the historical structural inequities they continue to face in Asheville City Schools. The conversations around educational inequity have been held primarily by Asheville's Black community. More recently, after data showing the disparity was made public, community-wide discussions throughout Asheville have been held around the structural inequities that perpetuate the so-called "achievement gap." This has ushered in key community-led steps to address the issue. Here, the author highlights a few of these initiatives:

- Expanding Equity in Our Schools, a local community-led group that is focused on ending educational inequity in Asheville, and The University of North Carolina Asheville's (UNCA) Africana Studies Program presented a symposium on September 14, 2019. The free symposium brought together a think tank of local scholars that included Dr. Summer Carrol of Lenoir Rhyne, Dr. Brandi Hinnant-Crawford of Western Carolina University (WCU), Darrius Stanley of WCU, and Dr. Tiece Ruffin of UNCA. Together they emphasized research-based best practices and solutions that support positive academic outcomes for Black youth and promote Black children thriving in ACS.
- Comprised of members of Asheville's Black community, Black Town Hall (BTH) is an initiative ushered in by Libby Kyles, a former teacher at ACS. The focus of BTH is to identify, prioritize, and address issues impacting our communities. Data collected from community-wide BTH meetings informed the process for Asheville PEAK Academy, a charter school formed to address the needs of Black youth who are underserved in ACS and Buncombe County Schools. PEAK Academy is scheduled to open in the fall of 2021.
- ACS is no longer using ICS and has created a specific arm within its administration to focus on Equity. This has ushered in ACS contracting with the local scholars who presented at the symposium to provide professional development related to the solutions they shared at the event, for the ACS district. This includes professional development for specific groups, such as administration and teachers, in addition to professional development that is open to the general community. Professional development priorities include: Equitable discipline trainings for administrators, trainings specific to equity for all teachers new to the district before they enter the classroom, and responsive teaching.
- "LEANING In: Supporting Black Youth - Youth-Led Listening Sessions" are consistently held through the work of Artists Designing Evolution (adé PROJECT). The listening sessions are an intentionally curated space for Black youth and youth program leadership to create a shared agenda to disrupt disparities in Asheville. The process is youth-inspired, youth-facilitated, and youth-led. The gatherings are interactive, and use facilitated conversations and strategies around mentorship, education and learning, social justice and racial equity, and culture and resiliency. Additionally, the Asheville City Schools Foundation (ACSF), an independent non-profit organization dedicated to educational success for ACS students, is collaborating with adé PROJECT to fund student-led professional development for the teachers.
- ACSF and the United Way of Asheville-Buncombe are collaborating in their use of a community school initiative developed by the Logan Square Network that focuses on parent engagement. This initiative prioritizes removing three key barriers to Black and Brown youth thriving in ACS that were highlighted in a community assessment: Black and Brown parents not feeling welcome in the school environment, lack of timely communication to these parents by teachers, and lack of engagement by parents of color in the school community. The initiative focuses on a parent-teacher cohort where parents work side by side with teachers to create a more culturally responsive classroom. Parents receive a stipend for their participation and are provided support in further developing their leadership skills in the ways that they choose.
- ACSF is shifting its funding of individual professional development awards to collective professional development through the Racial Equity Institute with the intention to address the achievement gap.

These initiatives are a great start in addressing the inequities Black youth face in ACS. Yet, it is important to understand that attending trainings is not enough to change deeply ingrained ideas and beliefs. For decades teacher education has called on teachers to engage in deep reflection about their practice. It will take this deep personal reflection, in addition to working to be anti-racist, to eradicate the racial and cultural bias ingrained in white teachers. It will take teachers and administrators reckoning what they have been taught to believe about Black youth to transform the institution of education to one that is equitable for Black youth. It requires teachers and administrators being held accountable for outcomes for Black youth. It requires ACS and other community partners to continue to collaborate with the Black community in ways that are meaningful, healing, and provide avenues to justice and equity. And this is just the beginning.

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