

# Moja

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An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies



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*unity in diversity*



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

Special Issue

## Closing the Opportunity Gap: Black Children Thriving in Schools

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## Moja's Adinkra Symbology



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MATE MASIE

*wisdom and knowledge*



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### **Our First Edition:**

Welcome to our first edition of *Moja*: one with a special focus. *Moja* was born on the University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA) campus as an opportunity for creating a forum that would invite, encourage, and support the interdisciplinary work of Africana Studies. It was created as a space where people, engaged in many forms of critical and creative inquiry and expression, could present their materials/performances/ideas to the community. In other places, in the past, Africana Studies sometimes focused more on one component of the community than another: African, African American, or African Diasporic. This created artificial barriers to communication instead of unifying the community. But UNCA's Africana Studies has always strived to avoid such approaches. Thus, this interdisciplinary journal and its name—*Moja*. Its mission: to create a welcoming space, a gathering place for academics, intellectuals, community activists, artists, and all people dedicated to interrogating, understanding, documenting, celebrating all things Africana—past, present, and future.

***Moja is a Swahili word meaning one. Moja was chosen as the name of our Interdisciplinary Africana Studies journal in recognition of the collective heritage—and cultural differences—of Africans and people of African descent. Moja is the intellectual unification of Africana people who, though separated by geopolitical maps, continue to assert their cultural traditions, and retrieve their repressed histories through a decolonizing process. Moja, One! Unity is Strength.***

To that end, we have chosen to begin with a Special Edition crafted from a Symposium held in the fall of 2019 in Asheville, North Carolina on “Closing the Opportunity Gap: Black Children Thriving in Schools,” especially in the Western North Carolina region. The papers presented here offer best practices from contemporary scholars about how to achieve that. The presenters are themselves people who have been educated in those systems and are currently scholars, teachers, activists, and parents of children being educated in similar institutions. *Moja* is proud to have the opportunity to provide greater access to the work of these scholars and hopes to engage the readership in a robust discussion of and amplification of these ideas.

The event sponsors provided this description of the inspiration for and intentions of their work:

***Asheville is in a crisis. We have the worst academic outcomes for Black children in the state of North Carolina.***

*This opportunity gap is a result of the structural inequities Black children face within the educational system. Emphasizing the best practices in education, a think tank of local scholars will present solutions that promote black children thriving in our schools. This think tank seeks to increase awareness and generate ideas leading to the implementation of these solutions in our region.*

*To address these crises, a team of scholars in Western North Carolina will come together to present the best practices that support black children thriving in our schools.*

This first edition includes work by the following scholars and community activists:

- Dr. Agya Boakye-Boaten (*University of North Carolina Asheville*)
- Cortina Jenelle Caldwell (*Artists Designing Evolution Project, LLC*)
- Dr. Summer Carrol (*Lenoir-Rhyne University*)
- Dr. Brandi N. Hinnant-Crawford (*Western Carolina University*)
- Itiyopiya Ewart (*Expanding Equity in Our Schools*)
- Dr. Joseph Fox (*Fox Management Consulting Enterprises, LLC*)
- Dr. Tiece Ruffin (*University of North Carolina Asheville*)
- Dr. Darrius Stanley (*Western Carolina University*)

Finally, in addition to the work of these scholars and activists, we include a special blessing by Dr. Dwight B. Mullen (Professor Emeritus of the Department of Political Science, UNC Asheville).

We welcome your responses and look forward to your future submissions.

**The Guest Editorial Staff:**

Dr. Dolly Jenkins Mullen  
Dr. Dwight Mullen  
Dr. Deborah (Dee) James  
Dr. Charles G. James, Jr.  
Professors Emerita  
UNC Asheville



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**Dwight B. Mullen**

*Professor Emeritus, UNC Asheville*

An Interdisciplinary Scholarly Journal  
An Archive of and for Black Minds  
An Academic Exercise in the service of Black Societies  
An Articulation of the Power of the People

In the names of those who journaled before our journey even began  
For the sake of those whose journey is yet to begin  
Because “We the People” has yet to include Our People  
We offer this Work

Wells, Abbot, Murphy chronicled and informed  
Woodson, Bethune-Cookman, Morrison imagined and taught  
Schomburg, Carver, McNair developed and explored  
Malcolm, Martin, Mandela loved and liberated  
DuBois, Davis, Tutu persisted and connected

The pages that follow are written in the shadows of those who lit the path  
We thank them  
The works of the selected authors document Blackness  
We are enriched  
But the Dissection of Racism remains incomplete  
We are challenged

And we are blessed and honored to rise as ONE to meet this challenge.



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## **Closing Opportunity Gaps through Love: Challenges & Opportunities**

**Summer Carrol**

*Lenoir-Rhyne University*

*“There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them.” Dr. Asa Hilliard (1933-2007)*

How do you help Black children thrive in schools? *Love them*. A directive that seems simple on the surface, but anyone who has been married or in any committed relationship knows that loving someone is not always easy. It is not the “warm and fuzzy” feeling sometimes depicted in movies or storybooks. Love is a choice. It is a choice to work and serve on behalf of someone; to work and serve even when that person may appear unappreciative or when there may seem to be no benefit for the service. It is a choice to do what is best for the person even when it causes you or the person pain or discomfort. It is not a passive choice. Love requires intention. Loving someone requires inner strength and clarity of conviction. When times get tough, love requires sacrifice, determination, resilience, and a commitment to what is right and good. Love requires grace and a tender heart. As we ponder what love is in relation to teaching, the first question to answer is, what does this type of love look like in the classroom? Secondly, can love close opportunity gaps and lead to more Black children thriving in American schools? This article posits that yes, love can close opportunity gaps, but only the intentional, enduring type of love described above. This is a whatever-it-takes type of love. Akin to what Duncan-Andrade & Morrell (2008) describe as Revolutionary Love:

It looks like endless dedication, an unyielding belief in the brilliance and potential of every student, and the commitment to stop at nothing to get kids to learn. It demands the energy and passion to present learning as an amazing opportunity for young people to prepare themselves to be engaged citizens and social actors. This something else [Revolutionary Love] is defined as never giving up. It is a continual search for more effective ways to help young people to learn and to demonstrate their learning in academically and socially powerful ways. This something else is revolutionary love. When teachers see revolutionary change in

their students, classrooms, and schools, then they will know that they are practicing that sort of love” (p. 187).

Duncan-Andrade and Morrel (2008) say this love is the “something else” (p. 187) teachers must have beyond theories, plans, and instructional practices if they are to effect radical change in their students and in classrooms; in other words, if they are to close the opportunity gaps we speak of in this special issue. And, as I have emphasized in my above explanation of love, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell caution that “love is never easy, because great love also means great pain. It means carrying a burden. It means suffering empathically. It means recognizing and reacting to inequitable conditions that we have the power to change” and having the courage to act (p. 188).

Applying this whatever-it-takes, revolutionary type of love to close opportunity gaps requires first recognizing the reasons for the persistent achievement gap and then understanding the difference between the achievement gap and the opportunity-to-learn gap. It also requires an understanding of challenges teachers may encounter when attempting to love in this way, and finally, to move forward with this type of love, one needs to see an example of this love in action. This article provides all of the above.

### **Why does the Achievement Gap Persist?**

Gloria Ladson-Billings (2006), author of *Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Students* (1994, 2009), offers a transformative theory on how we should perceive and address the achievement gap. She says that the fact that there is a gap is not surprising, given the history of racism and inequitable distribution of resources in the United States of America. She depicts the achievement gap as being a result of a series of “debts” the U.S. has accumulated and “deficits” people of color have as a result. The historical debt she identifies involves how the nation has viewed minority races as inferior and has profited from their free labor. This debt also involves how education had been legally denied to minorities and how assimilation theory has created minorities as outcasts. The economic debt involves how “separate schooling always allows for differential funding” (Ladson-Billings, 2006, p. 6); the amount of funding schools receive rises with the increase in white students. Ladson-Billings argues that this achievement gap vs. debt idea can be compared to the income vs. wealth disparity. She asserts that because of income disparity and the historical debt, Blacks have not been able to build wealth at the same rate and level as Whites (Mandara, et al., 2009; Oliver & Shapiro, 1997, as cited in Ladson-Billings, 2006). The same, she posits, could be true for achievement. Because Blacks’ access to education has historically been more limited than Whites’, collectively, their academic achievement levels may not be on par with their white peers. Of course, there are exceptions—Black people who outperform their white peers and white people who lag behind Blacks academically; however, in the same way Blacks have not been able to build wealth at the same rate and level as Whites because their income has historically been less and their access to generational wealth has been stymied, so are they often academically disadvantaged in comparison to their white peers because of generations of denied educational opportunities.

Lastly, Ladson-Billings (2006) discusses the country's moral debt owed to historically marginalized people of color, describing it as the "disparity between what we know is right and what we do" (p. 8). She argues that all of these debts must be considered when examining the achievement gap. As Ladson-Billings's reasoning has shown us, the achievement gap is a given because of our history and the educational debt that America has inherited that needs to be repaid through equitable opportunities for Black students. It is the opportunity-to-learn gap that we can address. By addressing increased opportunities for Black students, we chip away at the educational debt that has accumulated throughout history. We can begin to pay back the debts by providing equitable opportunities for students to learn.

### **What is the opportunity-to-learn gap?**

An alternative view of the achievement gap is the opportunity-to-learn gap (Hilliard, 2003; Irvine, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010), the focus of the symposium at which this lecture was delivered. This alternative view considers the achievement gap through a *process* lens rather than a *product* lens. This process perspective frames the gap as the *opportunities* (Hilliard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 2006) students have to learn and the quality of teaching service that they receive (Hilliard, 2003). As I have already discussed, Ladson-Billings (2006) argues that the United States has denied Black Americans historical, economic, socio-political, and moral opportunities that have resulted in a persistent achievement gap. These stolen opportunities have resulted in an educational deficit (i.e. in an achievement gap) for Black students and closing the deficit—providing opportunities for progress—is the answer to closing opportunity gaps.

This article is based on the premise that good teaching, teaching that demonstrates and reflects love, can close opportunity and achievement gaps. I remind you that this "whatever it takes" type of love is a choice and requires intentionality. For the purpose of this article, I am defining "whatever-it-takes" love as a love that challenges the status quo thinking about Blackness and about teaching. It is a love that goes over and beyond the call of duty to meet students where they are and help them grow to new levels of learning, and it is a love that persists through challenges and discomfort.

### **Loving Through Care, Creativity, and Courage**

When speaking to those contemplating pursuing a degree in teaching, I often say, "Caring, creative, and courageous people make good teachers. Can you care? How creative are you? Are you courageous?" Ultimately, I am asking these guiding questions to help individuals think about the answer to this single question: Can you love all students? I use **CARE**, **CREATIVE**, and **COURAGEOUS** as acronyms that represent qualities and actions necessary to teach effectively—to love. Can you care? Can you show **Concern** for all, **Awareness** for all, **Respect** for all, and **Empathy** for *all*? *All* has become a code word for students of color and particularly African American and Latino students. *All* represents inclusion of students who are not white and at least middle class and who may not speak the language of school; i.e., Standard American English or the language of power (Delpit, 1988). Caring means having genuine concern for the well-being and achievement of *all* and having an awareness of the racialized

experiences (Lopez, 2007) that come along with being a student of color. It also means that one has ventured to walk a few miles in their shoes and thus can attempt to understand why a colorblind (Husband, 2016; Monohan, 2006) approach is not the best approach to teaching these students.

Secondly, I ask prospective teachers to reflect on their **creative** thinking skills, ensuring they recognize that to teach effectively just knowing their content area is not enough. Having strong **Content** knowledge is expected, but so much more is necessary to close opportunity gaps through love. Teachers must also be **Resourceful**, especially those who teach in school districts in which most students are not coming from middle or upper-class homes. They must teach with what they have and they must teach the students in front of them and they must do this **Enthusiastically**, not with a complaining attitude or with a focus on what materials or resources they don't have. Enthusiasm is contagious and students will respond to the energy the teacher brings into the classroom. One must be **Adaptable**—willing to change lesson plans and approaches when what was planned is not working. An effective teacher must always be willing to reflect and ask the question, What can I do differently to help students learn? To close gaps, teachers must be willing to go **The extra mile** for students. Doing just enough to get by will not close gaps. Teachers must be **Innovative**, relying more on novel ideas designed with the students in front of them in mind and relying less on scripted plans or theories that do not take into account the individual and collective identities of each respective class of students. Indeed, gap-closing teachers must be **vision-oriented**. They must have a clear image in their minds of the innovative learning experiences possible in their classroom with their group of learners and they must be willing to do whatever is necessary to bring that vision to life. Lastly, creative, gap-closing teachers **Engage** in interdisciplinary and co-curricular learning opportunities within their school building and community. Learning does not start and stop within their personal classroom; rather, the engaged teacher demonstrates a commitment to high-quality teaching by connecting herself and her students to activities that enhance learning experiences. Being creative in the classroom involves looking outside of the classroom for additional ways to help students learn and thrive.

Beyond being caring and creative, teachers who want to close opportunity gaps for Black and brown students must be **courageous**. The late, great Maya Angelou said “without courage, we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We cannot be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest<sup>1</sup>.” *And*, I would add, we cannot love in a way that closes opportunity gaps without courage. Courage means continuing on in the face of challenges and in the face of one's own fears. Teachers must overcome their own fears of inadequacy; their own fears of prejudice and ostracism due to their advocacy for students of color; their own fears of repercussions they may face for speaking out against racism and injustice. They must be willing to **Challenge the status quo** in themselves and in the schools and communities in which they teach. They must be committed to **Opportunities for All**; show **Unconditional love** and **Resilience**; they must **Accept the High Calling** of being a teacher, and they must **Get up again and again** to teach even when feeling discouraged, and they must **Expect** to see students achieve. It takes courage to truly teach in a way that closes opportunity gaps.

I use the above acronyms, Caring, Creative, and Courageous, to give those considering teaching as a profession an idea of the mental, emotional, and intellectual rigor required to be an

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<sup>1</sup> 1988 Interview in USA Today

effective teacher. I aim to have potential, pre-service and practicing teachers rethink what love means when their knee-jerk response to questions concerning equity is, “I’m colorblind. I love all of my students.” I want them to reflect on and reconsider their idea of love. I also want them to begin to think about what internal and external challenges they might encounter in their efforts to teach all students effectively. Teachers must be provided the encouragement and the space to identify and reflect on personal challenges that may be inhibiting their teaching efforts. In the next section, I share results from research that centers on a key challenge Black teachers have reported encountering in their experiences teaching Black students: positional frustration.

### **Positional Frustration: The Challenge of Enacting Racial Uplift Pedagogy**

Positional frustration, the struggle to position racial uplift in one’s pedagogy, is one of the challenges some Black teachers experience in their efforts to help Black students achieve (Carrol, 2017). Precisely, it “involves teachers’ push-back against the racial uplift teaching philosophy that has historically informed Black education as well as, contrarily, teachers’ sense of guilt about not living up to the “racial uplift” standard set by Black teachers from previous generations” (Carrol, 2017, p. 124). Most of the teachers in this study felt there was something special they should do for their Black students because they were Black teachers and they shared in the struggle that is a common denominator for people of color in this country and particularly Black people. As Black teachers and former Black students, they had a special understanding of what scholar Janice Hale (2001) calls “Learning While Black”. They knew they had a responsibility to close the gap. But they struggled with how. Before the *Brown v. Board of Topeka Kansas* decision (1954), racial uplift was a given for Black teachers. That was a part of the curriculum (Fairclough, 2004; Irvine, 1989; Perry, 2003; Walker, 2009, 2012). They had to teach students not only the academics, but they also had to teach them how to survive as a Black person in a white world. Educated, middle class Blacks felt it was their duty to uplift the race. For them, education was a means of uplifting the race, of positioning students for academic, economic, civic, and social success. Teachers in the study wanted to still do these things, but couldn’t figure out what that looked like in our 21st Century classrooms and in the post-*Brown* era of colorblindness. The Black Lives Matter movement (2013-present) has helped to crystalize this very real struggle as its message highlights that the very existence of this dilemma indicates that the wounds of past and present racism are festering and craving healing balms. This reality manifests itself in schools within the hearts and minds of teachers. The increasing momentum of the Black Lives Matter movement after the murder of George Floyd (Hill, Tiefenthäler, Triebert, Jordan, Willis, and Stein, 2020) has awakened white America to the truth that color consciousness (Husband, 2016) not colorblindness is what is necessary to move the nation toward accomplishing the goal of racial equity. The teachers in my study and others (Dickar, 2008; Foster, 1990) were unsure how to be color conscious in a post-*Brown* integrated school environment in which the school and society expect a colorblind teaching approach. This is because part of the post-*Brown* schooling acculturation process included embracing a colorblind approach to teaching: teachers should not see color and they should pretend all of the negative baggage that comes with America’s racist origin and history does not exist. This internal and systemic question of how to position racial realities and knowledge in the classroom is one that must be answered if teachers are to close opportunity gaps through love. Critical theorists Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) argue that Revolutionary Love is not possible without

addressing the trauma associated with learning in hegemonic classroom spaces governed by a historically socially oppressive education system.

How, then, can teachers address the positional frustration they feel about race in the classroom? I propose that there is a need for a transformed racial uplift pedagogy for contemporary school environments. I put forward that racial uplift does not have to be a divisive term when we think about helping Black students thrive. Racial uplift is another way of saying close the encouragement gap and the perspective-of-potential gap between white students and students of color. It means close the love gap. It means to lift up a race of people that have historically been dismissed and put down. Lifting students up means seeing Black students through a lens of potential and not a deficit lens that is based on society's historical devaluation of kids of color and their potential. It means approaching teaching with an equity lens—that is, give all students what they need instead of giving all students the same thing to be fair or equal (being colorblind). When we look at what Black students need, we must recognize the educational debt and moral debt that has accrued on the backs of this race of people. As we plan and deliver lessons, discuss students in meetings, and interact with them, we must consider the stereotype threat phenomenon (Steele and Aranson, 1995) which says that just the threat of confirming a negative stereotype about one's identity group (in this case, racial identity) causes students of color to underperform in testing and other academic situations, and we must recognize that many, if not most, Black and brown children may carry this type of racial trauma with them into the classroom. Trauma that is a result of nothing more than a fear of failure, disgrace, or underperformance due to the color of their skin and the negative labels society has placed on that particular color. To address the challenge of positional frustration, teachers must embrace and enact a 21st century pedagogy of racial uplift that has a whatever-it-takes type of love at its core.

Ms. Kelly, a teacher in a research study I conducted on the perspectives and experiences of Black teachers who taught Black students, demonstrated elements of what modern-day racial uplift and the accompanying intentional, enduring love looks like in action. Her reflections and responses so powerfully reflect gap-closing love that I have included them in this article as raw data.

***Ms. Kelly Reflects on a “Whatever-it-takes” Experience***

Ah! I remember the day Darla Hayes told me she wanted to go away for the summer, that she hated babysitting her brother and she refused to do it another summer. She'd rather be writing a new script or chapters for her book. I got on that computer and found a journalism camp at Brown University. Immediately printed the application and Darla and I read through it. She was happy but said her mom didn't have or wouldn't pay thousands of dollars for her to go “write” for the summer. I thought about my mom, ‘what would she do here?’ I didn't have thousands to lend—not on this school teacher's budget—but there were ways. It had to happen.

*In other words, Mr. Kelly had to close the gap.*

Over the next six months, we did bake sales, cookies, brownies, cupcakes, banana pudding, etcetera... that was another one of Darla's hobbies. She enjoyed baking.

We made greeting cards for Christmas. We sold candy-grams for Valentine's Day. Bottom line, on June 17<sup>th</sup>, Darla packed all her things and headed to Brown for the summer to become a better writer.

(Writing Prompt #3)

Ms. Kelly used her creative-thinking and genuine care to close an opportunity gap for Darla. She had a vision for what was possible for Darla that Darla saw as impossible. She went over and beyond the call of duty to open a daunting door for this student. Ms. Kelly did not stop with her content-knowledge; helping this student required more than knowledge of English/Language Arts. She had to be more than just a teacher of content to close the opportunity gap for this student. She had to be the creative, resourceful, innovative, and caring teacher described earlier in this article. Gap-closing teachers do not see students as distant "others"; rather, like Ms. Kelly, who described viewing her African American students as her sisters, brothers, cousins, nieces, and nephews, gap-closing teachers see students through a personal lens—they take personal responsibility for these students and love them as if they were their own. Ms. Kelly said, "With my Black students, especially, and not all, but some, especially my a-level/comp kids, I want to make their learning experience as enriching and carefree as possible. Providing them with extra resources to achieve success (Writing Prompt #3). Ms. Kelly is enacting racial uplift pedagogy; she is making special efforts to ensure her Black students have the resources they need to achieve success, an act that does not require her to give less to other students who may not be Black. She is simply accessing whatever resources are possible to give the Black students who need more an extra boost.

### ***Ms. Kelly Empathizes with an Underperforming Student***

As part of the noted study, Ms. Kelly was invited to reflect on her teaching by stepping into the students' shoes and writing a letter to herself from the perspective of one of her students. She chose to write from the perspective of a student who was not achieving at high levels and who struggled to understand the material, but who expressed a desire to learn. This is the type of student Ms. Kelly was working hardest to help achieve.

Hey Ms. Kelly,

I'ont know why you want me to write this letter, but I'm trying to do better this semester, so I'm getting all my work done. I don't know what it is. I'ont really think English is THAT hard, but kinda like you said, it's hard for me to focus at times. Especially with Kayla always yelling at me and stuff. And I guess cause it's 8<sup>th</sup> period, and the day almost over, so I'm ready to go home. I mean, at first it got on my nerves when you would sit down beside me and pull up a desk next to me when we're working on our own, but I guess what you told my mom about me getting my work done and getting stuff right when u do that is true. No teacher really spent as much time with me as you do for real for real. And I know I said u always riding me, like when u see me posted up against the lockers between classes and you always be like "David, you should be heading to class so you won't be late" at first it was embarrassing in front of my boys, but now it's like I wait for you to come by and say that. And I think my boys get a little jealous because no one checks up on them like that. And remember when u heard that a bunch of my friends were fighting over the weekend and as soon as u saw me u asked if I was involved and if I was good. Well I really was telling the truth when I said I wasn't fighting, but it kinda made me feel good that you even asked. Most teachers woulda probably judged me or looked at

me in a funny way because I hang out with a rough crowd. I'm gonna start coming to the tutoring sessions that you invited me to more often so I can pass this test u always talking about. And ms. Kelly, u know how u always say I play like I'm hard core, but I'm really soft on the inside...you know what, u might be right. I'ma try to get better @ grammar stuff and do more work on our group research project. I'm bring my F up, watch me! You see I got an 80% on that quiz last Friday. Alright holla at ya boy,  
Lil' Tutu...aka Fat Boy...aka David

(Writing Prompt #3, font in original)

The caring, understanding tone of Ms. Kelly's letter suggests she empathizes with the struggling student and does not blame him for his low academic performance or poor work habits. Rather, she faults the insufficient opportunities for learning the student has had, pointing out that the student may not have received the attention he needed from previous teachers. Highlighting the lack of teacher attention this student may have had in the past shows Ms. Kelly is aware that this gap in opportunity is probably part of why Black students like David may be underachieving. She continues to emphasize that part of the problem with David's achievement may be due in part to how teachers judged and interacted with him.

Including these examples of inadequate teacher expectations reflects Ms. Kelly's view of the opportunity-to-learn gap as problematic with regards to helping students like David achieve. Her choice to write her perspective-taking prompt from the perspective of a non-honors, low-achieving student reveals the core of her heart as she strives to impact Black students, moving students like David from the losing to the winning side of the gap.

### ***"It's Tiring but I Have To": Ms. Kelly Adapts Teaching to Meet Students' Needs***

Ms. Kelly strives to close gaps not only by providing individualized support and special learning opportunities for students but also by delivering consistent teacher-directed but learner-centered instruction. The sense of urgency she sees in closing the gap is evident in her description of her approach to teaching the students who are not in honors classes:

They wear me out. I do a lot of teaching, cause I mean, I want them to do that group work and partners, but it's just not, I mean I can do it for like 10 or 15 minutes, you know, but I'm just teaching, like I mean they work, I mean, I'm up there, I'm just going, just doing everything I can to help them get it, whereas with my honors, I have a little more, I can give them more of the responsibility, whereas with them, and I've tried it, and I see that when I'm up there, they're getting it and they're learning, and the classroom is just such a different environment, versus when I try to let them do, so, I'm like, it's tiring, but I have to.

(Ms. Kelly, Interview, February 6, 2012)

A few things to highlight in Ms. Kelly's pedagogical approach: Ms. Kelly teaches with rigor. She models through direct instruction. Yes, students need collaborative learning experiences but not at the expense of direct teacher-led instructions. Ms. Kelly challenges the status quo by having high expectations of all students, not just those tracked into honors or advanced placement classes, which is often the case in schools (Oakes, 2005). Ms. Kelly invests time in her students

beyond the classroom, she knows her students, shows genuine care, is an advocate, has an awareness of the gaps, and believes her students can achieve with her help. She believes not only in her students' capabilities but she also believes in her own.

Teachers, if we want to close gaps through love, let's commit to checking our mindsets every day and in every classroom. We must have minds to:

1. Put relationships first.

Ms. Kelly cared, she valued, she took the time; she believed in her students; teachers who are encountering barriers preventing them from caring, valuing, and taking the time to really know their students, must admit it and seek help to break through those barriers. Don't be afraid to talk about it. Don't be ashamed. Acknowledge any unconscious bias and get help to adjust thinking. *We have to close the gap.*

2. Bring our A-Game to teaching.

Model, do think-alouds, connect to lives, stand on your head, whatever it takes. The myth that says Black students cannot sit through lectures or they only want to do group work must be dispelled. Get up there and model; recognize that teaching will take place in traditional and nontraditional ways. It may be with a small group, one on one, but the teacher must bring her A-Game. And growth may not be evident right away; it doesn't matter. In good conscience, gap-closing teachers can rest knowing they adapted to meet students' needs and that they did all they knew to do. *We have to close the gap.*

3. Recognize that gaps in skills are a result of gaps in opportunities.

These opportunity gaps pre-date you and your classroom. Don't allow systems of tracking within your school to dictate the level of rigor and challenge you present to your students. Close the skills gaps by increasing and strengthening opportunities for students to learn. Build on what they do know and the skills they do have first by recognizing and ensuring they *know* what they know. This will instill confidence in them and provide motivation for learning more. Remember, the achievement gap is the result of an education debt. Don't focus on the gap, focus on the opportunities you will provide to close the gap. We cannot allow the debt to continue building. *We have to close the gap.*

4. Enact a racial uplift pedagogy.

See racial uplift not as something that suggests prejudice, but as a means to help America repay the debt it owes Black children. Lift Black students up through your positive interactions with them; lift them up through your genuine interest in them; lift them up through your dedication to providing a safe, orderly, rigorous, and culturally relevant classroom environment. Lift them up through your preparedness. Lift them up through your advocacy of them. Lift them up through your awareness of—and response to—racism and social oppression. Lift them up by seeing them as valuable to the world. Lift them up by seeing each of them as a fellow human being and not as an “other” or as an

“exception” or as a charity case. When you lift up Black children, you lift up the race—not to elevate above any other race but to provide what is needed to close the gap, to pay down the debt. Lift them up, my fellow educators. Because (say it with me), *we have to close the gap.*

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

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*Preface: Black Ashevilleians 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 (Scarborough, 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 Ashevilleans 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?

## Case Scenario

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.

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
<p>*One day out-of-school suspension</p>	<p>*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?            *<a href="#">Examine teacher bias</a> 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.</p>

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!*

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## **Addressing Opportunity Gaps in Asheville City Schools: The Role of Educational Leaders**

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The City of Asheville, located in the Appalachian Mountains in Western NC, is a tourist destination. The fall leaves, the Biltmore Estate mansion, the hiking trails and unique shopping experiences all make it a place that draws people from all over the country. Unfortunately, Asheville is not only known for its beauty; Blue Ridge Public Radio correspondent Matt Bush described disparities in Asheville’s school achievement by saying, “It’s not only one of the worst in North Carolina, but in all of the US” (Bush, 2019, para. 2). This short essay will discuss the opportunity gap that persists in Asheville City Schools and the role of school leaders in cultivating the type of teachers necessary to disrupt this longstanding trend.

### **The Educational Opportunity Gap**

The opportunity gap is not a “nicer” way of saying achievement gap. On the contrary, the phrase acknowledges the gaps in educational opportunities that result in differential achievement outcomes. It puts the onus on educators, researchers, and concerned citizens not only to examine the outputs of educational systems but the inputs that produce the outcomes. Dr. Jacqueline Jordan Irvine, the Charles Howard Candler Professor of Urban Education Emerita at Emory University and premier scholar on multicultural education, explains disparate achievement results from:

the teacher quality gap; the teacher training gap; the challenging curriculum gap; the school funding gap; the digital divide gap; the wealth and income gap; the employment opportunity gap; the affordable housing gap; the health care gap; the nutrition gap; the school integration gap; and the quality childcare gap (Irvine, 2010, p. xii).

Opportunity gaps, and subsequently disparate achievement, are the result of complex systems that operate within society and within classrooms. Opportunity gaps are a wicked problem. They are wicked in the sense there is no simple straightforward solution, and wicked in the traditional sense of the word—malicious and intending to harm. Dr. Linda Darling-

Hammond has written extensively about societal aspects that contribute to gaps in opportunity in what she describes as the anatomy of inequality.

The first contributor in the anatomy of inequality is poverty. According to the US Census Bureau (2019), about 15% of Asheville lives below the poverty line. However, when examining African Americans in Asheville, that statistic jumps to 25.1%. There are a number of other economic indicators that show grave disparities between Asheville's White and Black communities. The estimated 2017 unemployment rate for Whites was 3.5% where it was 11.8% for African Americans. The median household income was \$49,183.00 for White Ashevilleans, and \$29,463.00 for Black Ashevilleans.

A second factor in Darling-Hammond's anatomy of inequality is segregation. She is explicit that segregation is not only between schools but within. The National Center for Education Statistics Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) illustrates that African American students make up 13% of the students in Asheville City Schools; yet simultaneously, the North Carolina Schools Report Card shows in the 2018-19 school year, African Americans were only 6.65% of those enrolled in Advanced Placement courses. Darling-Hammond goes on to discuss differential access to high quality teachers, rigorous curriculum, and early childhood learning opportunities as factors contributing to the opportunity gap as well.

Dr. Rich Milner also provides a framework for understanding the opportunity gap, but his framework examines teacher attitudes and behaviors that manifest as barriers to students' opportunities to learn within the classroom. He outlines five "interconnected" areas: "1) colorblindness, 2) cultural conflicts, 3) the myth of meritocracy, 4) low expectations and deficit mindsets, and 5) context-neutral mindsets and practices" (Milner, 2012, p. 698). Teacher beliefs and perspectives about students are so critical in determining what they give students, even when they do not realize their beliefs are influencing their actions in the classroom. Their cultural worldview impacts the behaviors they see as problematic; their implicit bias will influence which students they give the benefit of the doubt. While it is necessary for school leaders to take on their traditional roles as community leaders to combat poverty and other societal forces that impact their students, at the very least, the school leader must try to curtail teacher behaviors that further exacerbate differential access to opportunities to learn—such as the ones Milner outlines in his framework.

When delving into differential access to high quality curriculum and low-expectations and deficit ideologies, it is also critical to discuss race. It is difficult to discuss race and racism in a city like Asheville, because of so many well-meaning White people. Robin DiAngelo (2018) discusses in *White Fragility* how most White people have learned to think about racism and racists in terms of good people and bad people, and no one considers themselves a bad person. In such contexts, people want to discuss class instead of race. For example, Asheville City Schools' new superintendent, Dr. Gene Freeman, acknowledged, "There is an epidemic of Black kids falling behind," while also explaining that the epidemic is rooted in class differences (Gordon, 2019, para. 15). Dr. Freeman explains, as documented in the Asheville Citizen Times, "The data speaks for itself. However, I don't want to put that label on a group of students. Because when you really look at it, it's poverty-driven" (Gordon, 2019, para. 18).

*DOWN Magazine* (Defining Our World Now), a publication by students of color at Yale, speaks at length about White liberalism and how it can be detrimental to movements seeking to alleviate oppressions of people of color. When there is a refusal to discuss or acknowledge whiteness and its benefits, there is also a refusal to understand the plight of people of color generally, and Black people specifically. *DOWN* explains that under the guise of egalitarianism and championing the cause of the marginalized, “The white liberal will use reform to make incremental improvements in various systems of domination all while maintaining the underlying structures that engineer the harm in the first place” (2019, para. 3). Fifty-two (52) years prior, Martin Luther King Jr. (1967) expressed a similar sentiment; he explained:

The majority of White Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and steady growth toward a middle-class utopia embodying racial harmony. But unfortunately, this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity. . . [Their] limited degree of concern is a reflection of an inner-conflict which measures cautiously the impact of any change on the status quo. As the nation passes from opposing extremist behavior to the deeper and more pervasive elements of equality, White America reaffirms its bonds to the status quo (p. 557-558).

In a place like Asheville, that is a liberal city, it is critical to understand how liberalism and white supremacy can intersect, even if it is unintentional. Research on White teachers in a liberal city found that:

White privilege clouded and distorted the lens such that most . . . teachers were ‘disabled’ from seeing their own portraits. Most teachers seemed to show little awareness or understanding of the structural nature or roots of racism or its institutional manifestations in education (Kailin, 1999, p.743).

That is why in an effort to eliminate opportunity gaps for African American children, race has to be on the table. The data alone put race on the table; when disaggregated data illustrate in 2018-2019, 81% of African American children were not proficient in Mathematics and 78% were not proficient in English and Language Arts in Asheville City Schools (NC Schools Report Card 2018-19).

If leaders fail to center race in their pursuit for equity, teachers in Asheville will not be able to recognize cultural dissonance in the classroom, or how their deficit ideologies of certain groups leads to some students being referred to gifted programs while others are overlooked. Opportunity gaps will persist if educators cannot get to the root of the varying intersecting systems producing this problem—it is societal (i.e.: poverty and segregation) as well as interpersonal (teacher perceptions and practices). Leaders must get uncomfortable; without acknowledging the biases within school personnel—which mirror the biases in the larger society—one will not improve opportunities for children to learn.

It is essential to discuss the etymology and complexity of the opportunity gap before delving into solutions for several reasons. First and foremost, it is essential educators do not misuse the word and think it is synonymous with achievement gap. It is not. Second and of equal

importance is an understanding of the complexity of the problem which leads to a realization there is no single action that can solve such a problem. There is no silver bullet to equitable educational outcomes because there is no singular cause. As such, what is offered in the latter half of this essay is only one piece of a multifaceted strategy that will need to be employed for the success of the children in Asheville City. The remainder of this essay will present a framework for school leaders to employ to cultivate teachers to help mitigate and not contribute to gaps in opportunities.

## **School Leaders**

In their review on Culturally Responsive School Leadership, leadership scholars Khalifa, Gooden, and Davis (2016) called for a broad criteria of practices for culturally responsive leaders: critical self-awareness, culturally responsive curricula and teacher preparation, culturally responsive and inclusive school environments, and engaging students and parents in community contexts. The framework I present here is not as inclusive as what Khalifa and associates put forward. Instead, I examine one piece, developing critically conscious teachers, which is a critical piece in the interpersonal web that lead to gaps in opportunities within the classroom. Previously when describing this framework, the author used the metaphor of a plant, articulating its needs for growth:

For a plant to grow, it needs soil, water, and sunlight. Similarly, growing a critically conscious teacher requires a school climate and culture built on equity and justice—soil, a coherent induction and professional learning model that prioritizes maximizing opportunities to learn for all children—water, and a parent and community outreach agenda that recognizes the expertise and values the contribution of a wide array of stakeholders, particularly those from marginalized communities—sun (Hinnant-Crawford, 2019, para. 6).

Metaphor aside, to develop critically conscious teachers, leaders have to shape the school context, build instructional capacity, and engage school communities. For the purpose of this essay, a critically conscious teacher is one who has prophetic imagination about creating a better world and sees the role her students can play in bringing about that world. They also look at their students and see raw potential that it is their job to nourish and cultivate (not train or subordinate). When their students fail to perform, they reflect on their practice (and the practices of the school) and examine how the environment is not conducive to the students' success rather than blaming the students, the students' cultures, the students' families, or the community for lack of achievement. A critically conscious teacher believes deeper learning is necessary for all students and does not reserve such pedagogies for those labeled as gifted. They seek to understand their students and to understand their selves, as cultural beings, and are aware of how the classroom culture gives advantage to some while simultaneously being risk-inducing for others. A critically conscious teacher is a warm demander, holding students to high expectations while also displaying revolutionary love (Carroll, 2020). A critically conscious teacher does not sacrifice relevance for rigor or rigor for relevance, as they understand their students need both to access the material and see its applicability. Critically conscious teachers employ culturally relevant and culturally sustaining pedagogies. While every parent, especially Black parents, want

a critically conscious teacher, the likelihood of receiving such rests on the leaderships' ability to shape the context, build the capacity, and engage the community.

## Context

When a novice or veteran teacher enters a new building, they are inducted into that building's culture and climate. Culture and climate are distinct, but sometime conflated as one construct; in truth they work in tandem to create a context for critical consciousness or a context toxic to critical consciousness. Culture comes first. A school's culture is the values and beliefs of that particular school—explicit and implicit. Asheville City has an expressed commitment to equity, as the mission for the district is to “create learning environments that ensure excellence with equity for all students” (ACS, 2019). Their vision articulates a similar commitment to equity as the district seeks to, “empower and engage every child to learn, discover, and thrive” (ACS, 2019). Within this mission and vision there is an explicit commitment to *every child*. It is the responsibility of school leadership to articulate and garner support for the school's mission and vision. In a school with known disparities, the mission should speak to the leader's prophetic imagination, of a school that meets the needs of all children. The mission and vision are not the only things that communicate a school's values. Meeting agendas, organizational priorities, and the leader's speech and discourse around students, especially those historically marginalized, impact the culture of the school. The culture is not only expressed through rhetoric, but through praxis.

Culture influences the school's climate. Climate can be defined as how students, teachers, parents, and a variety of stakeholders experience the school space. It can also be defined as practices that lead to this experience. Is the school a welcoming space? Does coming into the office feel like signing in to see inmates at a correctional facility? Whose culture does the artwork throughout the building reflect? Whose contributions does the curriculum reflect? Are important signs posted in multiple languages? A climate that is conducive to the development of critically conscious teachers is one that is both inclusive and oriented towards improvement. An improvement orientation means a school that is constantly trying to improve its practices and processes to better serve all students. There is a built-in expectation of reflective practice. Currently, educators are looking at data and asking “how we can improve?” but they are often exploring those questions among themselves and not asking how structures they built or uphold are perpetuating inequity. For example, school leaders in Asheville should be asking how in 2018-2019, there were nearly 572 suspensions per 1000 Black students and nearly 49 suspensions per 1000 white students. The literature on discipline disparities explains time and time again that such disparities are usually not due to real differences in behavior, but to different perceptions of the behavior and different perceptions of who is innocent (Goff, Jackson, Leone, Lewis, Culotta, & DiTomasso, 2014; Simson, 2014; Skiba, Chung, Trachok, Baker, Sheya & Hughes, 2014). Leaders faced with such data must guide educators through root cause analyses to identify the root cause of the disparities and then develop interventions and test their effectiveness in addressing the problem. Perhaps through such an exploration they would find a need to change their climate by embracing transformative justice practices (Ruffin, 2020).

## Capacity

Scholars have often described the teacher development pipeline in three phases: preparation, induction, and continual professional learning. The school leader is responsible for the final two phases of development: induction and professional learning. Khalifa and associates (2016) explain it is incumbent upon Culturally Responsive School Leaders to “ensure teachers are and remain culturally responsive” (p. 1281). The continuity of capacity building for dealing with diverse learners is critical. One (or a few) professional development session on cultural relevance is not likely to change instruction, no matter how good that professional development is. And without the continuity, *the one and done*s, will lead to false conclusions such as: “culturally relevant teaching doesn’t work” and “we had the training and the kids still aren’t doing what they are supposed to do.”

In North Carolina, leaders cannot expect teachers from other schools or straight out of preparation programs to be culturally responsive. In an analysis of 8 dimensions of culturally responsive teaching evident in state teaching standards, North Carolina’s standards were found to only address four, and failed to differentiate levels of performance on those four (Muñiz, 2019). This means the onus is on the principal (and other school leaders such as assistant principals, coaches, and teacher leaders) to ensure teachers are being culturally responsive—without the guidance of professional standards. Subsequently, as the lead learner in the building, the principal must be able to recognize cultural responsiveness and where it is lacking so they can coach teachers to meet the needs of all students.

## Building Capacity

In building teacher capacity, leaders must build their capacity in *what* they teach (content), *how* they teach (pedagogy), and *who* they are teaching (social, political, and economic realities of their students). Often professional learning programs fail to explore who students are. When they do explore students, teachers can leave with reinforced deficit ideologies. They may think to themselves, “Our students are poor. We need to make school easy on them since life is hard.” This is known as the “you poor dear” syndrome; and critically conscious teachers have high expectations, they do not lower the bar. When leaders cultivate teachers that explore who their students are, teachers should develop an appreciation for their students and their culture that lead to better classroom experiences. Using tools of critical pedagogues and giving students voice and choice in their learning, teachers must develop assignments that give students the opportunity to teach their teachers about themselves. This could be achieved through a variety of means in all disciplines; examples include journaling, projects on their own families/histories/communities, or letting students define their own research questions. With an appreciation for who the students are, comes a degree of humility and a willingness to let the students take the lead in teaching teachers what is relevant. Teachers still need to do research and prompt students to explore things from multiple perspectives—to develop the critical consciousness amongst the students. Critically conscious teachers raise questions that prompt critical thinking such as, when reading text, they ask what may be the antagonist’s point of view? Or when exploring history, they question whose voice is not accounted for? When doing mathematics, they challenge students to question how could I use this analytical procedure to understand more about my city or my economic circumstances? Teachers must realize that

teaching is a dialogic action. It is not one way, but two-way and for it to truly be two-way teachers have to appreciate what it is the student brings to the dialogue and who the student is.

There is a substantial amount of literature on building teacher capacity and best practices for doing so. Leaders must understand how adults learn. Adult learning theories from andragogy to self-directed learning suggest when facilitating learning experiences for adults, the adult learner (educator) must see the necessity and applicability of the learning (Cox, 2015; Merriam, 2001). To build capacity for critically conscious teachers, leaders must recognize that previous knowledge, experiences, and socialization—facets that are typically seen as an asset to leverage when teaching adults—may actually be a hinderance. In such cases where life experience has led to deficit perspectives, leaders must begin by facilitating critical self-reflection where educators interrogate their own positionality and axiology as a precursor to learning new content. In fact, Kailin (1999) explains in-service and preservice teachers, “must be given meaningful education that will provide for significant time and breadth of knowledge so that they can begin the long process of unlearning racism” (p.746). It is the leader’s job to design such educational experiences for the teachers in their building.

When building capacity in the *what* and the *how* of teaching, leaders who cultivate critically conscious teachers will not put equity on the proverbial back burner. As it is a part of the mission and vision, equity is always on the table and always a priority. And as they consider what is best for students’ opportunity to learn, they will also consider what is best for the adults to learn. Leaders may choose to guide their capacity building program with the Learning Forward professional learning standards, which are informed by adult learning theories (Learning Forward, 2020). For instance, the standard on data says, “professional learning that increases effectiveness and results for all students uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning” (Learning Forward, 2020). If ACS school leaders want to illustrate the necessity and applicability of a book study using the text *These Kids Are Out of Control: Why We Must Reimagine Classroom Management for Equity*, they might begin by looking at discipline data as the impetus for such work. In doing so, they provide justification for the *what* and the *why* of this professional learning activity.

School leaders are at the helm of the induction and continued professional learning developmental phases for teachers; they cannot abandon what they already know about teaching and learning. In order to be leaders that build capacity for critical consciousness, they must provide learning experiences that:

- Give teachers an opportunity to explore their own positionality and how that impacts their practice
- Cultivate knowledge in the *what* (content), *how* (pedagogy), and *who* (students) of teaching
- Align with the school’s priorities and are relevant to the needs of the organization
- Are designed with the needs of adult learners in mind.

School leaders for critically conscious teachers will develop schools that are learning organizations. Professional learning experiences will not be seen as something additional to do but as an integral part of the organization’s continuous improvement culture.

## **Community**

The final thing a principal who cultivates critical consciousness must do is be a liaison between the school and the community. A teacher's job is to learn who their students are, but it is incumbent upon the principal to understand the community their school serves. Lomotey (1993) argues principals need an ethno-humanist role identity, in which they are not merely concerned with student's achievement, but the improvement of the entire community; and in the case of Black students, principals must be concerned with the welfare of the Black community. And when that principal becomes an expert in the community, they can facilitate the teachers' learning about the community and the students. When reaching out to the community, leaders must be well aware of the trauma the community has endured. They must also be aware that some of the trauma may have been inflicted on the community by the schools.

Principals have to make themselves available in the community. They must prioritize attendance at community events, and not to be the leader, but to sit and listen. If there is a forum or town hall, leaders should just be present. Only once the community adjusts to their presence, should leaders lend their voice. Similarly, leaders need to invite the community into their school buildings and not just to fulfill certain positions, such as on a PTO or a school improvement team. Real leaders consult with a variety of stakeholders on various things happening within the school. Leaders might be surprised to realize the untapped potential right there in the community. But if leaders are going to invite community to come and sit at their table, they must be willing to share power. A leader must do as Dr. Stanley (2020) implores: listen, engage, and partner—if they want to cultivate the development of critically conscious teachers.

## **School Leaders and the Opportunity Gap**

School leaders did not create opportunity gaps. A constellation of forces combine to create gaps in educational opportunities. However, the fact that leadership is not the origin of the gap does not absolve them from their responsibility to eliminate the gaps. While teachers are the most important influence on student achievement, leaders are the most important influence on growing the consciousness of teachers. Orchestrating a context, with a culture and climate focused on equity and justice, a comprehensive plan to build capacity—that includes the what, how, and who of teaching, and a community strategy—that does all of what Dr. Stanley suggests: listens, engages, and partners (Stanley, 2020), will enable the cultivation of teachers who are critically conscious. As educators, scholars, and concerned citizens examine the proliferation of forces that impact opportunity gaps, it is essential to remember, teacher development is only one piece of a much larger and complex puzzle; yet it is a piece that must be a priority for educational leaders in Asheville and beyond.

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

**Itiyopiya Ewart**

*Expanding Equity in Our Schools*

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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## **Addressing Unseen Suffering and Reimagining Possibility Through Community Engagement: Lessons from the Back of the Bus**

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I begin this paper by recognizing the wealth of traditionally minoritized communities. Minoritized communities have a wealth of knowledge, experience, capital, and ability. Local examples include: The YMI Cultural Center, YWCA, Burton Street Community Association, The Block, Shiloh Community Association, and Stephens Lee, to name a few. However, these communities' collective wealth and capital are consistently overlooked and undermined by educational reform efforts which fail to view school improvement and community development as inextricably tied to one another (Warren, 2005). As a result of ignoring community-based capital, American schooling has struggled to meet the needs of Black students and families, in particular (Anderson, 2004). It is important to recognize the efforts to provide education for Black people like: the Freedman bureau schools, the Rosenwald schools, the rise of Historically Black Colleges and Universities, and the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision, to name a few (Anderson, 1988; Watkins, 2001). Research chronicles the critical role of historically Black institutions' freedom crusades in the South, particularly through literacy campaigns, agricultural, and trade skill training (Anderson, 1988).

Additionally, more recent efforts like increased accountability standards (e.g., No Child Left Behind) and increased recruitment of minoritized educators, are worth recognition. However, despite a rhetoric of inclusion and equality, many of the aforementioned improvement initiatives have re-centered white, male, and middle-class belief systems and framed Black communities as chronically deficient (Anderson, 2004; Wun, 2014). Therefore, these initiatives continuously provide protracted educational advantages to those whose identities are privileged in society (i.e., white, middle class students) and disenfranchise Black and other minoritized communities (Leonardo, 2004). Additionally, Schutz (2006) explains "current social conditions suggest major limitations in schools' traditional focus on individual achievement as a path to success" (p.692) (e.g., NCLB). Hence, the efforts to improve the educational experiences of minoritized students should recognize the importance of their communities and the structural conditions that affect them. This requires practitioners to see Black communities as capable. This position paper serves two primary purposes: (1) it critiques historical and contemporary

educational reform efforts and, (2) it proposes a model for engaging Asheville's Black community perspectives in future educational reform.

### **A Legacy of Community Cultural Wealth**

Before reviewing the history, it is important to highlight some of the key assets, or forms of capital, that Black communities (i.e., Black Asheville) could offer school improvement efforts. Yosso (2005) defined Community Cultural Wealth as "an array of knowledge, skills, abilities and contacts possessed and utilized by Communities of Color to survive and resist macro and micro forms of oppression" (p.77). She posits six forms of such capital: (1) *aspirational capital*, which highlights the abilities of communities to maintain their hopes and dreams despite structural barriers, (2) *linguistic capital* which recognizes the importance of communities' communication practices (e.g., multi-lingual communities, storytelling), (3) *familial capital*, or the value of community-based history and memory practices which foster kinship, (4) *social capital*, which recognizes the importance of social connections and community-based resources to help community members navigate society, (5) *navigational capital*, or the abilities of minoritized communities to outmaneuver racist and classist institutions and, (6) *resistant capital*, which acknowledges communities' abilities to engage in oppositional behaviors when presented with structural and overt inequalities (e.g., The Little Rock Nine, Greensboro Sit-Ins). These alternative forms of capital highlight and define the untapped resources that could be leveraged to improve educational outcomes for Black youth in contemporary public schools.

### **A Brief History of Black Education**

Despite the research on wealthy communities of color, scholars have consistently highlighted the inability of educational researchers, leaders, and policy makers to recognize the strengths and resistant legacies of Black communities (Horsford & Heilig, 2014). Hence, educational improvement initiatives continuously frame Black communities as deficits needing to be saved, rather than assets to reform initiatives. Horsford & D'Amico (2015) stated:

Without a historical lens, researchers run the risk of presenting educational issues as temporal phenomena that result from a chronologically isolated moment and an idiosyncratic place, rather than the latest incarnation of a much larger and more involved legacy. The lack of historical sensitivity produces skewed definitions of problems and incomplete reform initiatives (p.864).

Without a historical lens that acknowledges the strengths of Black communities, educational reform efforts will continue to intensify outcome inequalities for such communities. Simply put, ignoring the history of structural disenfranchisement of racially minoritized people in favor of short-sighted, paternal solutions to inequalities, is racist. Next, I will outline a brief history of strong and wealthy Black community educational efforts.

Black communities, despite obstacles, have found unique ways to circumvent educational barriers, including but not limited to Antebellum educational exclusion and the desegregation efforts of the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century. Despite threats of flogging and death, enslaved Blacks practiced

subversive education on southern plantations (Williams, 2009). By the end of the Civil War, Blacks in the South swayed the general public to consider universal education for all. Dubois (1964) stated “public education for all at public expense was, in the South, a Negro idea” (p.641). In response to the “separate but equal” rhetoric of *Plessy vs. Ferguson 1896*, segregated Black communities developed and supported their own educational institutions which provided Black youth: (1) strong, safe havens for communal bonding, (2) wrap-around services and supports, (3) parental engagement and, (4) racial uplift, radical love, and communal counseling (Dixson & Dingus, 2008; Siddle Walker, 1996). In Asheville, such schools included: Victoria Academy, Hill Street School, Mountain Street School, and Livingston Street School. Additionally, Stephens-Lee High School—Asheville’s only Black public high school—opened in 1923 (Waters, 2012). The “castle on the hill” supported African American students through rigorous curriculum, high academic standards, and college-going skills (Waters, 2012; Davis, 1980).

Contemporaneously, Blacks in the south also developed their own privately funded, grassroots post-secondary schools like Bethune Cookman College (Anderson, 1988). These institutions were funded by local communities and churches to help develop Black students for a desegregated world that did not yet exist (Siddle Walker, 1996). Locally, the Shiloh A.M.E Church housed a school for Black children in the church basement during the Reconstruction era (Waters, 2011). George Vanderbilt, who had recently relocated the Shiloh community to build his estate, noted the importance of school funding from the community (Waters, 2011). These locally supported institutions had obvious funding disparities; yet, they provided a space for Black communities to support their own through academic achievement.

By the 1950’s, desegregation efforts across the South eroded much of the assets and capital developed by Black communities (Baker, 2001; Tillman, 2004). The *Brown* decision ushered in a host of disruptive policies and practices which threatened the social, economic, and cultural fabric of segregated Black communities (Horsford, 2011; Tillman, 2004). The subsequent losses of Black educators, school leaders, and schools contributed to the decline in the Black middle class and other vestiges which exacerbated the educational, social, and political disenfranchisement of Black communities (Baker, 2001). In 1965, Asheville’s Stephens-Lee High School was closed, leaving a shocking blow to the Black community; one which the community has yet to recover from. Davis (1980) states the decision to close Stephens-Lee in favor of school integration efforts “divided the Black and White community more than any issue in this century” (p.43).

Unfortunately, contemporary educational improvement initiatives like the accountability or standards movement, neoliberal reform, increase in charter schools, and other neoliberal programs (e.g., Teach for America) have continuously ignored the history and wealth of Black communities. As such, the aforementioned initiatives intensify “gaps” in opportunity for Black communities via school closures, district turnaround policies, and threats of district takeover, to name a few (Lipman, 2015). As a result of continued, incomplete improvement initiatives, Asheville City Schools (ACS) touts the 5<sup>th</sup> largest achievement gap between Black and White students in the nation (Scarborough, 2019).

Given this knowledge, I suggest school and district leaders re-engage Black communities in ways that center their assets and wealth, over deficit-based conceptualizations of their abilities and commitments to education. In other words, through a brief read of Black educational history, one can ascertain that contemporary deficit narratives which position Black communities as lazy, unconcerned about education, and in need of aid-based initiatives are at the very least historically inaccurate. Therefore, ahistorical and deficit-based problem framing lead to insufficient reform efforts which exacerbate inequities rather than address them (Horsford & Heilig, 2014; Wun, 2014). Hence, educational leaders and policy makers must develop a lens which recognizes and incorporates the collective legacies, wealth, and perspectives of local Black communities when developing reform initiatives. Next, I propose a model for school and district leaders to practice asset-based community engagement with Asheville's Black communities.

### **Community Engaged Leadership Practices**

*“You can't change the school without changing the neighborhood, you can't change the neighborhood without changing the city, ain't nobody prepared to change the city because “they” want the city to be white.”- James Baldwin, 1979*

### **Learning About Black Asheville**

School and district leaders should lead efforts to engage the communities they serve. However, effectively engaging communities that have experienced various forms of oppression from official institutions, like schools and local government, requires leaders to carefully develop the appropriate perspectives of and relationships with Black communities (Khalifa, 2018). In other words, all efforts to engage Black communities should be subject to the terms and pace set by the community members. Green (2017) suggests that schools should complete Community Based Equity Audits to address common organizational disparities like: discipline disproportionalities, inequitable representation of minoritized students in gifted/talented programs, and attendance disparities, to name a few. Community Based Equity Audits call for the following steps: (1) develop a diverse, school-based leadership team to lead the audit, (2) create asset maps with the communities and conduct interviews with local community leaders, (3) co-construct a leadership team comprised of school and community leaders, and (4) collect asset-based data like community history, spatial assets, and local conditions. After the completion of the data collection process and analysis, the co-constructed leadership team should collectively discuss community-based goals and actions steps for improvement (Green, 2017). This initial step starts the process of rebuilding trust between communities and schools. Further, the process of learning could ensure that school and community goals are consistent. Below, I highlight some key ideas that school-based personnel should consider when learning about communities.

- All educators should become aware of the history of the Black neighborhoods and communities they serve.
- All educators should be keenly aware of the current political, economic, and social situations of the Black communities they serve.
- Students' knowledge of and experiences within communities should be featured and discussed at the school.

- School leaders should recognize and learn from the **assets** of Black neighborhoods and communities.

### **Engage with Black Asheville**

After responsive and informed learning occurs, schools can effectively re-engage Black communities. Educational leaders (including school-based leadership teams) can responsibly re-engage communities by: (1) maintaining open lines of communication with students and families, (2) attending community-based events and forums, and (3) building responsive relationships with community leaders and families. Khalifa (2018) suggests that culturally responsive school leaders should hold forums or rap sessions which allow students and families to speak their truths and voice their concerns about school-based issues. Additionally, school leaders should engage community assets to inform curriculum. Communal human resources such as business owners, elders, and other local intellectuals could be leveraged to teach lessons and tell community history in classrooms (Khalifa, 2018). Moreover, community walkthroughs via report card delivery is a great way for educational practitioners to develop relationships with caregivers and guardians (Khalifa, 2018). Finally, educational leaders must stay abreast of community-based initiatives by visiting local YWCA's, YMCA's, businesses, churches, and other community hubs in hopes of gaining additional perspectives of the diverse communities they serve (Green, 2017). These engagement practices, although not exhaustive, represent a cadre of responsible efforts that educational leaders can integrate into their regimen. Below, I highlight a set of practices and ideas that educators and school leaders should incorporate to regain trust and support the communities they serve.

- School leaders should be responsibly involved in neighborhood and/or community politics (e.g., boards, advisory committees).
- School leaders should be keenly aware of and regularly attend community-based events (e.g., faith-based events, community gatherings, neighborhood preservation meetings).
- All educators should participate in community walk-throughs and home visits.

### **Partner with Black Asheville**

Finally, scholars suggest that schools have the responsibility to both provide resources and leverage existing community resources to support all of the needs of students and families (Khalifa, 2012, 2018; Green, 2015, 2017). Green (2015) suggests that schools should be positioned as a spatial community asset and align resources to support students and families. Schools can leverage their connections with other institutions (e.g., local institutes of higher education, health facilities) to support the needs of the communities they serve (Green, 2015). In one case, Green (2015) detailed the engagement practices of a school leader who developed multiple partnerships with supportive institutions. One partnership included a health facility which provided a free or reduced cost community-based clinic at the school. The same school leader leveraged their relationship with a local university to provide financial workshops for parents and other community members, on school grounds. Additionally, Green (2015) highlights the work of a school leader who developed a community garden to provide fresh produce and agricultural learning experiences, in a low-opportunity neighborhood. In each case, the school leader, who had developed strong relational ties with the community, leveraged their

position to champion the needs of the surrounding Black community. These exemplars, although by no means exhaustive, provide powerful portraits of the possibilities of school leaders committed to improving the experiences of Black youth and their communities. Below, I provide some additional thoughts for school leaders to consider.

- Educational leaders must partner with community assets (e.g., grassroots organizers, community centers, faith-based institutions, non-profits) to provide wrap around services for students and families.
- Educational leaders must engage local health facilities, businesses, and institutes of higher education to provide additional support for low-opportunity communities.

### **Implications and Possibilities**

Researchers, educational leaders, and policy makers should understand that we cannot hope to pursue educational equity and justice without leveraging the assets of the communities that we serve. Hence, educational leaders must develop a deep understanding of Community Cultural Wealth and how to leverage that wealth to improve the educational experiences of minoritized youth. Scholarship has proven that community-based reform efforts are effective (Green, 2015; Khalifa, 2018). Such efforts can potentially improve graduation rates, community service participation, and increase writing scores, to name a few (See Green, 2015 and Khalifa, 2018 for more details). Armed with this perspective, it is morally irresponsible to ignore the abilities of Black communities to both self-define and self-determine their path to educational justice. Hence, I offer the following suggestions for educational practitioners to begin the work of engaging community, immediately:

- ***Clean up your own house***—engage in book studies, lectures, conferences, and other learning opportunities to develop racial awareness at a personal and institutional level,
- ***Organize for justice and stop the bleeding***—develop school and district-level teams to lead the equity work. Address issues in: School Improvement Plans, Curriculum, and Discipline Matrices,
- ***Coalition Build***—develop strong relationships with the communities served by the institution. Use geospatial technology, social networking, and other methods to identify the assets of each community served. Attend community events and forums,
- ***Working with, not for***—cultivate a plan for educational improvement in partnership with local community leaders,
- ***Use your platform***—leverage existing networks and connections to align resources which support historically disenfranchised communities (Green, 2015, 2017; Khalifa, 2018).

This scholarship calls for a renewed vision of educational reform for practitioners and policy makers. The implications of this brief review of research are clear. Collective progress toward educational justice requires educational practitioners to: bridge the gap between communities and schools, leverage Community Cultural Wealth, and continue to coalition-build on the community's terms. Collectively, educational practitioners and communities can co-construct a vision of improvement and liberation for all students. All educational practitioners must: (1) *listen* to community perspectives, goals, and needs, (2) *engage* the assets and abilities of communities' in improvement efforts, and (3) *partner* with community and other local resources

(e.g., MDTMT, MSTMT, YTL, Youthful HAND, YWCA), to continuously develop both schools and communities.

### **The Elephant in the Room: Closing Thoughts for Asheville's Schools**

Asheville's educational leaders have a responsibility to redress the historical inequities which have strong implications for current gaps in opportunity and achievement. Local educational officials mustn't presume that their education, experience, connections, finances, or expertise will unilaterally solve Asheville's district-level inequities. These assumptions are short-sighted, naïve, paternal, and decidedly absurd. Moreover, educational officials cannot continue to ignore the aptitude and collective ingenuity present in local Black communities. Historically, these communities have proven that they can and will educate their own in efforts to secure their long-term success. Most recently, local, Black leaders have unabashedly supported the establishment of PEAK Academy, which explicitly focuses on the needs of Black and low-income students (Gordon, 2020).

As stated above, efforts to improve conditions for Asheville's Black students and families must begin and end with local expertise over top-down reform. Without this lens for community, schools will continue to see disparities in achievement, attendance, discipline, and a host of other immeasurable outcomes. Continued disregard could lead to a mass exodus of Asheville's Black families, in search of richer soil. Many may seek out the PEAK Academy which is scheduled to begin classes in August of 2021. These are the consequences of structural and institutional forms of racism. Regardless of the educational provider (e.g., ACS, PEAK Academy), educational leaders must re-engage Black communities and place their expertise at the center of school and district improvement efforts. Period.

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## **Reframing the Educational Narrative: Impacts of Culture, Implicit Biases, and Opportunities**

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### **Abstract**

The educational system in the United States has remained basically the same throughout its history as one that disproportionately has a negative impact on women, the poor, and students of color due to system and cultural biases. To fully understand the flaws in the system, one must first understand the implicit biases that foster a culture of gender-based and race-based discrimination that have led to a wider opportunity gap. The opportunity gap is related to the achievement gap in that the lack of educational resources, support, and opportunity lead to reduced academic achievement. Race-based bias has been examined as it relates to the criminal justice system (Russell-Brown, 2018), and can provide some clear examples that can be transferred to discussions related to biases found in the educational system. Likewise, a discussion related to culture (Kreitner and Kinicki, 2010), provides insight as to the formation of culture that leads to discriminatory practices and implicit biases. A comprehensive approach must include a discussion related to the impact that Redlining and Greenlining (Kuthy, 2017) have on educational success, as well as a comparison of students' success in resources-rich locations and students' success in resources-poor locations. These cultural biases have created a system of rating the success of students based on indicators that continue to widen the opportunity gap. Students of color that attended schools during their formative years that were located in "Red Zones" were not afforded the same resources as schools located in "Green Zones." The cultural biases led to naming these schools located in resources-poor locations as underperforming schools, thus tying perceptions that students from "Red Zone Districts" are underprepared for and not college ready. The intent of the following narrative is to provide a framework in which to start the discussion related to the cultural biases steeped in the educational system from its inception. It is not intended to provide an in-depth narrative of the cited works. More in-depth analysis is needed related to each topic, as well as more research specific to certain geographic locations that have common characteristics.

**Keywords:** Culture, Biases, Opportunity Gap, Redlining, School to Prison Pipeline

## **Introduction**

Understanding culture is an extremely important aspect of identifying biases that have occurred in the United States Education System. Kreitner and Kimicki (2010) defined culture as shared values and beliefs when discussing the behaviors that lead to perceptions and attitudes of individuals that make up a workforce. The authors' work is a compilation of theories and practices that shape the discipline of Organizational Behavior, and provide a framework for understanding organizational culture, including:

- Antecedents (Values)
- Organizational Culture
- Organizational Structures and Practices
- Group and Social Processes
- Collective Attitudes and Behavior
- Organizational Outcomes (p. 65).

When viewing the Educational System as a subsystem of components that form the foundation of a country, the discussion turns to those factors valued by the society related to educating the citizens of that society. The culture is espoused by individuals who have access to educational resources, the perceived value of education, the preparation of teachers and professors, and the value of credentials and degrees. Cash (2003) examined the early support of public universities in the United States and stated that the prevalent attitude during the early colonial colleges period of Harvard, Yale, and Princeton was that of promoting civic virtue for the privileged. Thus, the early culture was viewed as educating the wealthy, and particularly white males from wealthy families. The changing landscape of education for the general public was supported by the Land Ordinance of 1785 in which federal lands were set aside for state universities (Cash 2003). As state universities sought funding, private donations led to the creation of the fundraising model that excluded education for women, the poor, and students of color. Cash (2003) discussed the model as an important part of the start-up phase at the University of Vermont and the University of North Carolina. The support from prominent citizens, literary societies, as well as ministers shaped not only the fundraising model, but the early culture of the state universities, and created the system of privilege that led to an early elitism model of education. This model excluded women and persons of color and became the basis for public education.

### **Land-Grant Colleges (The Morrill Acts)**

Sorber (2018) examined the early land-grant colleges that had a mandate to provide practical education to the public as an alternative to the elite, classical colleges and universities. The Land Grant College Act, also known as the Morrill Act of 1862, provided federal support for the education of former slaves and other Black Americans. However, he quoted a study at the Illinois Industrial University that found that the majority of its students were from the larger, affluent farms instead of the smaller farms. Sober (2018) stated:

With regard to the Northeast, previous works have revealed that Brown College, Dartmouth College, Yale College's Sheffield Scientific School, and the University of Vermont did not become more accessible after being designated land-grant institutions. Indeed, there was little change made to the high admissions standards (including the

Latin requirement), the liberal arts and science curricula, traditional classroom pedagogy, or the socioeconomic profile of the student body at these former colonial colleges (p. 103).

Land-grant colleges in the south, such as Clemson and South Carolina State, tended to align more closely to fulfilling the mission of land-grant universities related to teaching agriculture science, and engineering. For the most part in the South, the early education for Blacks was by the Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that provided open access to students of color.

### **Historical Black Colleges and Universities**

The Freedmen's Bureau, also known as the Bureau of Refugee, Freedmen, and Abandoned Land, mission was to ease the transition of former enslaved people to freedom. Allen, Jewell, Griffin, and Wolf (2007) examined the rise of HBCUs and stated, "Historically Black colleges and universities have been at the center of the Black struggle for equality and dignity" (p. 263). Allen, et al., quoted the work of Jewell (2007) and stated,

In many ways, African Americans viewed education as the ultimate emancipator, enabling them to distance themselves from slavery, move past their subordinate status in society, and achieve social mobility. Despite opposition from Southern conservatives who viewed educational access for freed slaves as a threat to White supremacy, African Americans and their allies began establishing schools. In the 25 years after the Civil War, approximately 100 institutions of higher learning were created to educate freed African Americans, primarily in the southern United States (p. 267).

The authors also discussed that initially schools were staffed by African Americans and members of the community. Sources of funding included churches, the community, and associations such as Disciples of Christ, American Missionary Association, and the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The college education of Black students was almost exclusively conducted by HBCUs prior to the 1950s (Allen, et al., 2007).

Brown (2013) discussed the impact of the Morrill Act of 1890 in which funds were mandated to be extended to educational institutions that enrolled Black Americans. The South had continued the practice of segregation in which public HBCUs, also referred to as the "1890 schools" were treated as separate public entities. Brown argued that the unintentional consequence of the Act was to create a system of "separate but unequal" education (p.9). His work cited Walters's (1991) goals of HBCUs as:

- a. Maintaining the Black historical and cultural tradition (and cultural influences emanating from the Black community)
- b. Providing leadership for the Black community through the important social role of college administrators, scholars, and students in community affairs
- c. Providing an economic center in the Black community
- d. Providing Black role models who interpret the way in which social, political, and economic dynamics impact Black people

- e. Providing college graduates with a unique competence to address issues and concerns across minority and majority population
- f. Producing Black graduates for specialized research, institutional training, and information dissemination for Black and other minority communities (p.5).

Brown (2013) stated that for all of the benefits of the HBCUs, they were still not funded at the same level as traditional white colleges. Disparities still occur related to faculty salaries and funding levels.

## **Community Colleges**

The general white adult population was beginning to enroll in community colleges which tended to be more vocational in nature. Cohen and Brawer (2003) provided a comprehensive view of the community college system in the United States. The authors described community colleges as fulfilling a greater need for local citizens by its comprehensive nature in which the purposes addressed students' remediation needs, workforce development, college transfer, continuing education, and career education. Most notable, the authors provided background concerning social forces leading to the expansion of community colleges as an extension of high school, changing student demographics, and the prevailing values of the time in which the aim of education was access for the general population. However, that general population remained mainly the focus of educating the "common man," primarily the less privileged white male. If the growth of the community college system did anything in the United States, it shed light on educational resources that were not equally dispersed throughout geographic locations. Cohen and Brawer (2003) wrote extensively about the intent to have a community college within a thirty-minute drive from all communities. They did not take into consideration the impact of redlining on the poor school districts and communities. Thus, the continuation of the dominant culture's view of low-wealth community students and students of color not being college ready.

## **Impacts of Redlining and Implicit Biases**

Kuthy (2017) examined the impacts of Redlining and Greenlining in Baltimore, Maryland, as the foundation of understanding root causes of racial inequities. She quoted Lipsitz (2011) as saying, "Racially segregated spaces have historically skewed opportunity and life chance along race lines: space has been one of the primary ways racial meaning has been constructed, teaching what places—and by extension who and what—matter" (p. 51).

Kuthy (2017) examined Baltimore's law in 1910 that prohibited Blacks and Whites from moving into areas occupied by the other race. The United States Supreme Court found the law unconstitutional in 1917; however, Baltimore became known as the first city to use restrictive covenants to limit the movement of Blacks and Jews. The practice of using restrictive covenants was not limited to Baltimore. The practice was part of the culture throughout the United States. The continued practice led to the passage of the National Housing Act of 1934. Kuthy (2017) pointed to the history of Redlining and Greenlining that built upon restrictive covenants and traced the practices to the National Housing Act of 1934. The Act established the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Kuthy built upon the work of Coates (2014), Lipsitz (2011), and Pietilla (2010) when describing the function of the FHA of insuring private mortgages, lowering

interest rates, and reducing the down payment required to buy a home. The FHA requested that the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) create "residential security maps" for 239 cities. The maps identified desirable "Greenline" zones and undesirable "Redline" zones based on perceived investment security for underwriting mortgages. As could be expected, the better school districts would follow into the areas of the "Greenline" zones, as well as other investment opportunities (Kuthy 2017).

Kuthy (2017) also examined the GI Bill of 1944 that was intended to assist returning veterans in purchasing homes. She argued that it widened the racial wealth gap (Opportunity Gap) as less than 2% of African Americans received federally insured home loans. She stated that African-American communities lost value as they deteriorated in the "Redlining" zones (p. 52). The racial biases continued to make it difficult for African Americans to utilize the GI Bill and take advantage of better schools, banks, and homes in the "Greenlining" zones.

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

Russell-Brown (2018) examined the impact of implicit racial bias in the Criminal Justice System; however, her work provides insights that can be applied to the educational system. She defined implicit biases as attitudes and stereotypes that develop unconsciously. The implicit biases can lead to behavior based on unconscious thought processes. One example that she used is a White police officer that has implicit bias toward Black males that might mistake a cell phone in the Black male's hand for a gun due to unconscious stereotyping of Black males as criminals. The same officer might perceive the cell phone in the hands of a White male as a phone instead of a gun because of the implicit bias (p. 186). Using this thought process, one must ask when applying it to the educational system, how do White teachers see Black students, particularly Black males, if those teachers have not been taught to recognize implicit biases? One must also ask of Black teachers, what are the implications of internalized racial biases?

The racial bias in the Criminal Justice System coupled with educational biases related toward Black males have created the foundation for what is commonly known as the school-to-prison pipeline. Mallett (2016) pointed to school policies and practices that provide punitive actions instead of education within public schools. The shift in paradigms is away from parents and teachers handling school disciplinary action to one of juvenile courts interaction. The author tackled the issues of moving from education to discipline, criminalization of education, and zero-tolerance programs. School systems have experienced the increase of police officers in classrooms and monitoring of hallways that resemble a prison environment instead of an educational environment. Unfortunately, the biases related to Black males remove educational opportunities as they become more involved with the criminal justice system than the educational system.

Likewise, Pigott, Stearns, and Khey (2017) examined the impact of School Resource Officers related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline. Defining the School to Prison Pipeline as a system in which young people are arrested instead of disciplined in schools for behaviors that would not normally be considered dangerous or criminal. The authors pointed to a culture of zero tolerance, use of School Resource Officers, high profile school shootings, and media coverage as further determinants of cultural shifts that impact the School to Prison Pipeline. The argument is

made that policies such as the Gun-Free School Act, Zero Tolerance, No Child Left Behind, and Suspension/Expulsions contribute to the number of students caught up in the pipeline. Quoting a study by the NAACP (2016), the author stated, “Thirty-five percent of black children in grades 7 – 12 have been suspended or expelled at some point during their time in school; this number can be compared to the 20% of Hispanics and 15% of whites” (p. 124).

## **Educational Opportunities**

The early cultural perceptions related to the value of education, policies that disproportionately negatively impacted Black students, and the practice of Redlining created the opportunity gap for students of color. Green, Sanchez, and Germain (2017) examined the geography of opportunities of an urban school district in the Northeastern section of the United States. The district was located in a resources-rich city, and the overall goal of the descriptive study was to use Geographic Information System (GIS) to examine the impact of spatial patterns and resources on high schools. The study built on the work of John Powell (2008) who stated, “Residential and spatial segregation is opportunity segregation” (p. 778). Poverty was another driving force to be considered as the opportunity gap seemed to have widened. Factors included in the case study were the economic growth of the city, (pseudonyms used to describe all locations in the study), the technology-based economies, job growth, increased population growth, and the segregated nature of the city. The impact of gentrification on the community of color had forced low-wealth communities out of traditional residential locations. The city had been described as “A place of opportunity, particularly for young, white professionals in the technology industry” (p 784). The overall findings of the study suggested that (1) the same level of quality education was difficult to achieve for high schools across the district, (2) white families typically lived in neighborhoods of privilege that possessed more middle schools rated high-quality schools, and (3) students of color living in low-income attendance school zones had fewer opportunities (p. 799).

## **Measuring Opportunity**

*A Call for Change: The Social and Educational Factors Contributing to the Outcomes of Black Males in Urban Schools* (2010) was based on research conducted by the Council of the Great City Schools. The study examined several factors such as Readiness to Learn, Grade Four Reading Scale Scores, Grade Eight Reading Scale Scores, Grade Four Mathematics Scale Scores, Grade Eight Mathematics Scale Scores, High School Dropout Rates, Graduation Rates, and Percentage of Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmark Scores. Whereas many states used such variables to examine opportunity/achievement gaps, these variables do not tell the full story. A more comprehensive approach is needed to improve the educational pipeline and connect the dots of academic preparation, especially for students of color. Williamson’s (2007) dissertation, *Academic, Institutional, and Family Factors Affecting the Persistence of Black Males STEM Majors*, provided a framework to rethink the narrative related to academic achievement. The dissertation examined several factors that lead to success, but the overwhelming factor was the support students received. The early Black schools and colleges provided a community of support for students that cannot be duplicated in traditionally white educational institutions.

## Conclusion

When analyzing the educational system in the United States as a whole, the conclusion can be drawn that the system was created with implicit biases from the start. Educators have personally experienced biases and understand the past as prologue related to a culture that has not been too kind to black and brown students. Some of the frustrations that parents and children may be experiencing is lack of knowledge about the educational system, its policies, and procedures that established cultural biases related to the value of education. Understanding the early educational model related to a system created to favor white males from privileged families provides some answers to the lagging opportunity gap between resource-rich communities, low-wealth communities, and predominately black and brown communities in public education. The initial fear of educating slaves, freed men, and their children continues to make its way into policies and procedures that lead to an expanded school to prison pipeline. Additionally, understanding the evolution from the liberal arts philosophy of the early colleges and universities, to the Land-Grant, Historical Black Colleges and Universities, and Community Colleges lead to a better understanding of practices related to educating the adult population. More research is needed on each topic discussed in this article that is intended to provide some initial thoughts around the foundations of educational practices that are now current-day practices.

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## **An Afro Humanity Approach to Education: When We Tell Our Story**

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The story of Africa and Africans since the European modernity project, which started in the 15th century, has been told with one major aim: to diminish Africans and Africanity, and place European imperialism as the center of our humanity. The African story through Eurocentric narratives and epistemic structures has sought to justify European barbarity as civilizing, enlightening and rational, and Africans and Africanity as obscurantist and primitive. Thus, the African story has been a European fantasy project, one that imagined Africans as sub-humans, and subjected their humanness to non-humanity, a process that manifested in the peculiar institution of slavery, colonization, and coloniality. Africa, Africans, and people of African descent continue the struggle of extricating themselves from the tentacles of the European modernity project. This project, which was built on the otherization and dehumanization of the African, created a distorted image of Africa and Africans, and from which they still bear the scars. In the paper, I use African to refer to all peoples of Africa and of African descent, and whose locus of enunciation “the geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks” (Grosfoguel, 2007, p. 213) is Africa.

The encounter of Africans with Europeans at the onset of the European modernity project was not that of an encounter among equals, neither was it a peaceful and civil one. Indeed, countless European scholars have exposed the epistemic foundations which continue to inform the African playbook. For instance, David Hume, the most respected British philosopher, and Immanuel Kant, considered to be the greatest philosopher of modern times, in their writings considered the African to be in the realm of sub-humanity. For instance, Hume in 1753 wrote in a note attached to his essay “Of National Characters” that:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufactures amongst them, no arts, no sciences. On the other hand, the most rude and barbarous of the whites, such as the

ancient GERMANS, the present TARTARS, still have something eminent about them, in their valor, form of government, or some other particular. (p. 629)

Kant (1764) also wrote that:

The Negroes of Africa have by nature no feeling that rises above the ridiculous. Mr. Hume challenges anyone to adduce a single example where a Negro has demonstrated talents, and asserts that among the hundreds of thousands of blacks who have been transported elsewhere from their countries, although very many of them have been set free, nevertheless not a single one has ever been found who has accomplished something great in art or science or shown any other praiseworthy quality, while among the whites there are always those who rise up from the lowest rabble and through extraordinary gifts earn respect in the world. So essential is the difference between these two human kinds, and it seems to be just as great with regard to the capacities of mind as it is with respect to color. (p. 59)

The inevitability of the destruction of the African is set in motion, in spite of the universally declared aspirational ideals of Enlightenment, liberty, equality, fraternity or as the French will put it *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. It is obvious that Africans were not considered to be part of the European fraternity of humanity, thus these ideals were inapplicable to them, paving the way for the reemergence and institutionalization of the medieval era system of brutality and cruelty to be unleashed on the Africans.

Armed with the bible and the gun, Europeans descended on Africa and Africans with a sense of superiority and divine entitlement sanctioned by *Romanus Pontifex*, written by Pope Nicholas V. They discounted the humanity of Africans, their cultures, epistemologies, cosmologies, and embarked on a systemized destruction and dehumanization of the African and Africanity. In his book *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America* Lerone Bennett (1966) recounts a cataclysmic encounter between Henry the Navigator's men and some Africans. He writes:

There, on a fateful day in 1444, Henry's men came upon the first large group of Africans. They tiptoed through the high grass and crept to the edge of the village and then, said a contemporary, "they looked towards the settlement and saw that the Moors, with their women and children, were already coming as quickly as they could out of their dwellings, because they had caught sight of their enemies. But they, shouting out 'St. James,' 'St. George,' 'Portugal,' attacked them, killing and taking all they could." The pious Portuguese captured seventy more Africans, including a girl they found sleeping in a deserted village, and sailed home, where they baptized the captives and enslaved them. (p. 32)

This was the epic transformation of the destinies of Africans within the European modernity project. For the next four centuries, African bodies will be commodified, vilified and dehumanized to fuel the economic revolution of Europe and America. Africans were also subjugated through epistemic racism and humiliation. For instance, Nkrumah (1964) posits that:

The history of Africa, as presented by European scholars, has been encumbered with malicious myths. It was even denied that we were a historical people. It was said that

whereas other continents had shaped history, and determined its course, Africa had stood still, held down by inertia; that Africa was only propelled into history by European contact. (p. 62)

The commodification of African bodies meant the destruction of Africans and Africanity. Maquet (1974) defines Africanity as “the unique cultural face that Africa presents to the world” (p. 8). Here, I define Africanity as the ontological, epistemological, and cosmological foundations of Africans. Africanity is the collective experience of global Africa that seeks to recenter Africanness and extricate itself from Eurocentric distortions and control. This means Africans should be Afrocentric in thinking and doing. Asante (2013) maintains that to recenter our Africanness, we must use “all linguistic, psychological, sociological, and philosophical elements to defend African cultural elements” (p. 43). Therefore, it is imperative to engage in a new African consciousness, a paradigm, which reclaims the humanity of Africans through rememory, re-culture, and reclamation, a process I refer to as the 3Rs.

All human cultures are built on foundations that hold the key to the survival of the group. These foundations hold the sacred remedies through which the collective welfare of the group may be found. The beginnings of all things set the tone for future manifestations. Africans everywhere need to understand that the collective thriving of their people is inextricably linked to the foundations of their humanity. African humanity started not as a European project, but proud people who paved the way for the survival of all humanity. Africans were the first humans to engage nature for survival. Their pioneering skills and art of survival will guarantee the survival of all human species. Bennett (1966) writes “Negroes, or people who would be consider Negroes today, were among the first people to use tools, paint pictures, plant seeds and worship gods” (p. 5). This is the Africa, a continent and its people who were pioneering in our humanity, that we need to remember. This is the Africa that we need to teach Africans on the continent and diaspora to be proud of. This is the Africa we need to extricate from the Eurocentric fallacies and distortions. Europe has created an imperial universalistic epistemological superiority which projects its very limited worldview as “universal truths” and renders African epistemologies as inferior and at times even nonexistent. Ignoring our Africanity and centering Eurocentrism as the basis of our human existence and experience has been the most destructive European project from which we desperately need to recover. Africa and Africans need to remember their golden ages when African productions were bold, innovative, and devoid of negative European domination and influences. We need to rememory. To rememory is to know what it was before it was destroyed. As Morrison (1987) opined:

I used to think to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (p.35)

Africans have been assaulted and continue to suffer from the legacies of these onslaughts, but Africa never died. In fact, Africa will also be in an African individual, whether they acknowledge or not. This is what needs to be harnessed through rememory. Rememory is a

powerful tool to combat the systematic erasure of the African from the history of humanity, and to properly position the contributions of Africans in the birth of our human civilization.

Furthermore, Africans will have to engage in reculturing. This is a return to the basics, that is ReAfricanizing our entire humanity to reflect our Africanity—the ontological, epistemological and cosmological foundations of Africans. Africans were created uniquely; they were created African; why would anyone want to be different than who they were created to be? The European remains European, so why would the African not want to be African? Well, the answer is simple. A five-century sustained assault on Africans and Africanity is enough to have doubt about the self, and unconsciously participate in systems that continue to perpetuate these distortions. Europeans view themselves and the world through European lenses. It is about time African viewed themselves and the world through African lenses. There has to be new set of ideas, norms, mores, and value systems, which are neither in opposition nor in conformity to Eurocentrism. This should be an unequivocal delinking from the strangulation of Eurocentrism, which is the very foundation of the subjugation of Africans.

Parochialism and provincialism are the bedrocks of Eurocentrism, yet are projected as objective and universal. This means what is African is subjected through grossly limited and myopic European lenses for authentication, sanitization, and an eventual end product, which is distorted and not founded in Africanity. These Eurocentric characterizations of what is African have had dire consequences on African cultural reproductions, representations, and identities, and in most cases have been constructed to appease European sensibilities and authentication. This is why we need a reculturalization to develop a sense of self that is not a reactionary construct to the European epoch in Africa. Reculturalization process must center Africanity in all its forms and complexities that give the African a sense of pride and self-worth. A reculturalization process rethinks, reorganizes, and repositions African experiences as positive experiences of resilience, resistance, and reclamation in spite of centuries of systematized institutionalized destructiveness of European domination. A renaissance that produces a collectivist unified African, whose consciousness, sensibilities, actions, and deeds are reflected in Africanity, or in Afro humanism, Ubuntu, a Zulu word, which translates as “I am because we are”. Indeed, Harold Cruse (1984) suggests that “as long as the Negro's identity is in question, or open to self-doubts, then there can be no positive identification with the real demands of his political and economic existence” (p. 13).

Who and what we are as Africans will always be complicated due to our distorted histories. But it ought not be this complicated unless there are forces staunchly against any form of African unification. What is it about the African that evokes some of the most visceral and vociferous reactions, especially at the thought of an independently thinking African? An African unrestrained and unapologetic about expressing their Africanity. An African who wants to delink from the shackles of European intellectual and spiritual entanglement. One who wants to be truly free to express their Africanity without appeasement and fear. This is the African that needs to recreate a new sense of self, built on its original foundation of their being.

Perhaps the most insidious function of the European project was the creation of an epistemological system in which Africans initially had no option but to be forced into it. This epistemological system, built on the faulty premise of African inferiority and European

superiority, unfortunately continues to manifest in systems and institutions of learning today. In other words, Africans everywhere are captives of epistemological systems that were created with them as subhuman, yet they are still willingly participating in them. Some Africans continue to buy into an Afro-deficit model, which creates the illusion that there was nothing there. But for the benevolence of the European modernity project, Africans could not be part of the modern world, a world defined only by European terms. Africans have bought into this and strive to function within this false premise. Thus, Africans can only express their humanity through their acceptance of European humanism, the very foundation of the destruction of African humanity. This means the African can only be part of the European modernity project through a process of deAfricanization and embracing the very system built on their dehumanization. No wonder the African continues to exist in a state of confusion, and their existence subjected to the whims of the European modernity project. It will be impossible to not exist in a world that was created solely for the benefit of one group. But we ought not to live according to their terms. Shying away from our core humanistic value systems is the surest way to maintain the subordinated status of Africans.

Africans cannot afford not to be Africans. A return to African humanity is the only way to reclaim our Africanity. This is a process that starts with an introspective reengagement of our African consciousness, Ubuntu, “I am because we are.” This should manifest in our families, our communities, and our institutions. We need to reengage our collectivist orientation as a people. We need to go back and reclaim. We ought not to be ashamed—that is the very idea promulgated by the European modernity project, to isolate us from our beings. Why do we “learn” only to depart from our core humanity and embrace a humanity that was formed in opposition to our humanness? As we acknowledge the “400 Year of Return”, we must use that as an opportunity to Reclaim us, Think African, Do African and Be African.

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## Community Think Tank & Consensus Forward: In Text & Images

**Cortina Jenelle Caldwell**

*Artists Designing Evolution,, LLC*

### Preface: Altar



Closing the Opportunity Gap: Black Children Thriving in Schools : A community gathering exploring best practices and solutions that support positive academic outcomes for Black youth

September 14, 2019

@ Unitarian Universalist  
Congregation of Asheville



## Introduction

At the inaugural Closing the Opportunity Gap Symposium on September 14, 2019 a little over 200 community members gathered at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville for a half day-long gathering of scholars, community members, leaders, organizations, and a community facilitator. Through a foundation and lens set in creative facilitation, local organizer and Founder/Creative Director of Artists Designing Evolution (adé PROJECT) led the final segment of the day. Creative facilitation is a practice taught by Partners for Youth Empowerment (PYE) Global that is rooted in the belief that we all have the ability to imagine the future. We do it all the time, and yet too often our envisioning takes the form of unconscious fear or dread. In our “just in time” world, and given the multitude of challenges facing us, it’s hard to think forward in a generative manner. As creative facilitators we believe it’s important to regularly exercise our visionary capacities and to share visioning practices so we can fully engage our creative imaginations in working toward a world we want.

Based on the facilitation practices engaged by Cortina, we zoomed in on what we heard:

- Knowing the research just means that we are informed.
- Grounding and moving from strengths + taking inventory of assets is the way forward, both for Black youth in the schools, and also for the community at-large.

We took pause for the facts that had been presented:

- Community is the key to ACTION.
- Culture is the foundation of IDENTITY.
- Giving what is needed is EQUITY + INCLUSION, therefore it is JUSTICE.

The youth took the mic and wove narrative through poetry, calling to us:

- Can you see us?

- Why don't you know us?

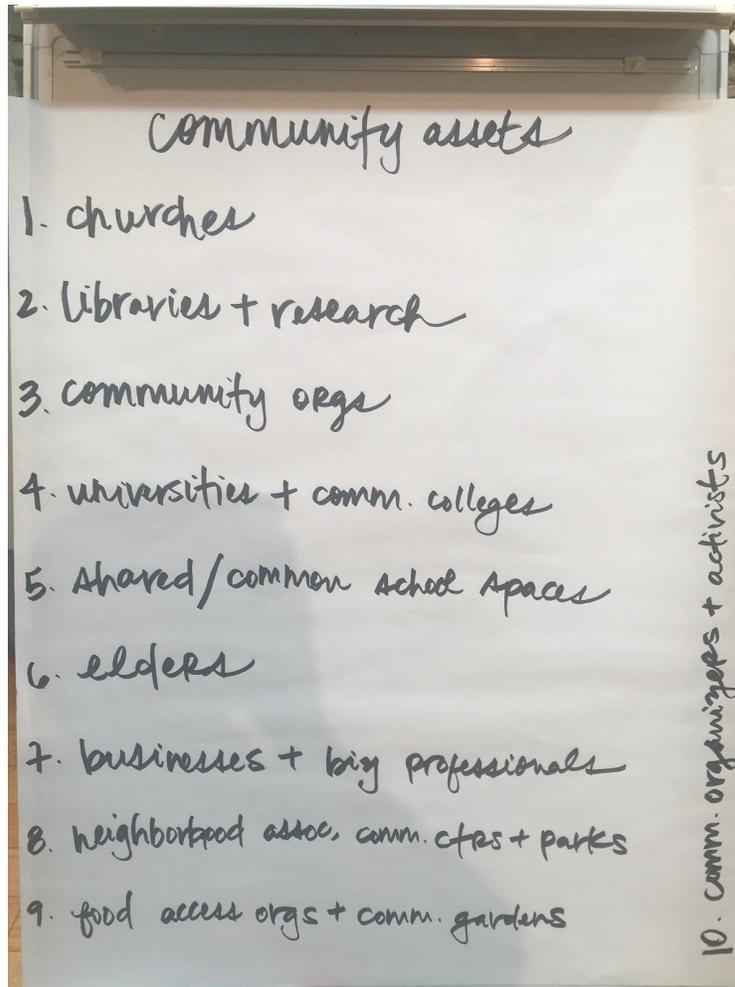
Then, using Creative Facilitation methods, Cortina named the important philosophies that we were standing upon and how these beliefs catalyze change organizationally:

- The wisdom is in the room. In other words, we have what we need, and we have the people we need to move things forward. If we think not, we only need to check the room.
- Reflect back what you heard and engage only in two-way conversations.
- Nothing about us, without us, is for us. Check: who is leading? Who is acting? Who showed up... and what role do they have as things move forward?

And in the final piece of this segment, Cortina facilitated an exercise combining practices known as Open Space, Milling, and Creative Visioning. In order to move the attendees from listening to engaged action, Cortina created ten community assets that were named and/or touched upon by the scholars providing presentations on the disparities for Black youth in education; what is needed to shift the culture of schools, education, and learning for Black youth; as well as the necessity of cultural inclusion for Black youth in school and the community in order for authentic, experiential learning to take place. These ten assets were derived from research on community asset mapping, developmental assets, equity + inclusion in order to shift from disparity to parity for Black students in the present educational system. We MUST bring the community back into the school in order for opportunity to shift for Black students, families, and ultimately the whole of the community.

- Businesses + Business Professionals
- Churches
- Community Organizations
- Community Organizers + Activists
- Elders
- Food Access + Community Gardens
- Libraries + Research
- Neighborhood Associations, Community Centers + Parks
- Shared + Common School Spaces
- Universities + Colleges

## Community Assets.



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## Community Member Response Summary: Dr. Joseph Fox

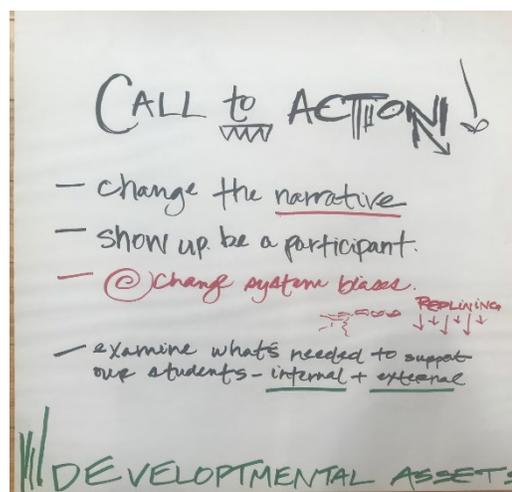
After presentations by the panel of scholars, four regional and local Black education scholars, Dr. Joseph Fox provided commentary as the respondent. This is Cortina's summary of his response.

### Call to Action

- Change the narrative.
- Show up and be an engaged participant.
- Challenge and change system biases... how is redlining STILL showing up?
- Examine what is needed to support our students internally and externally.
- Engage in research and application of the [DEVELOPMENTAL ASSETS](#).

### Developmental Assets

- Search Institute has identified 40 positive supports and strengths that young people need to succeed. Half of the assets focus on the relationships and opportunities they need in their families, schools, and communities (external assets). The remaining assets focus on the social-emotional strengths, values, and commitments that are nurtured within young people (internal assets).
- The Developmental Assets® are 40 research-based, positive experiences and qualities that influence young people's development, helping them become caring, responsible, and productive adults.
- Over time, studies of more than 5 million young people consistently show that the more assets that young people have, the less likely they are to engage in a wide range of high-risk behaviors and the more likely they are to thrive.
- To download Developmental Assets and dig more deeply into the framework, visit - [http://page.search-institute.org/dev-assets-download\\_1212-17](http://page.search-institute.org/dev-assets-download_1212-17)



## **Creative facilitation using open space, milling & creative visioning**

The community think tank occurred after the panel of presentations by Black education scholars and the response by the community respondent, Dr. Joseph Fox. The community think tank involved all symposium participants and was facilitated by Cortina using creative facilitation methods. Below, you'll find text and an image associated with each community asset, ten in all, from the community think tank.

### **Strategy + Community Assets: Businesses + Biz Professionals (#1)**

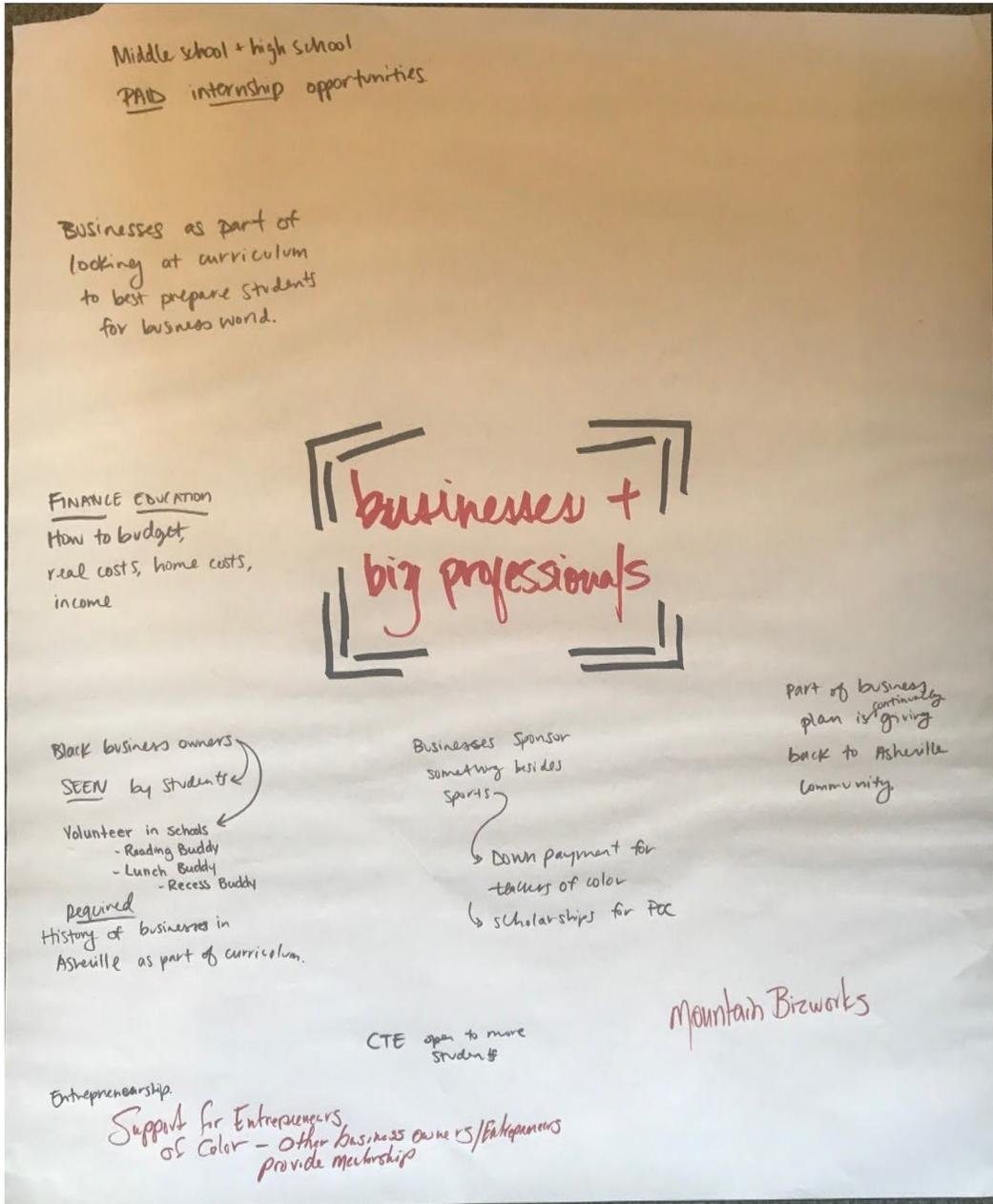
#### *Strategy + Action*

- Middle + high school - paid internship opportunities.
- Businesses as part of looking at curriculum to prepare students for the biz world.
- Finance education - how to budget, home costs, business costs, income generation.
- Black business owners - seen by students; volunteer in schools as a reading buddy, lunch buddy, recess buddy; required learning of the history of Black businesses in Asheville as part of the curriculum.
- CTE - open to more students.
- Businesses sponsor something besides spirits/wines/alcohol - down payment for teachers of color and scholarships for people of color (POCs).
- All businesses consider adopting a plan for continuously giving back to Asheville as part of their explicit business plan.

#### *People + Places*

- Mountain Bizworks
- Western Women's Business Center
- AB Tech Small Business Center

- Western Carolina University
- Lenoir Rhyne University

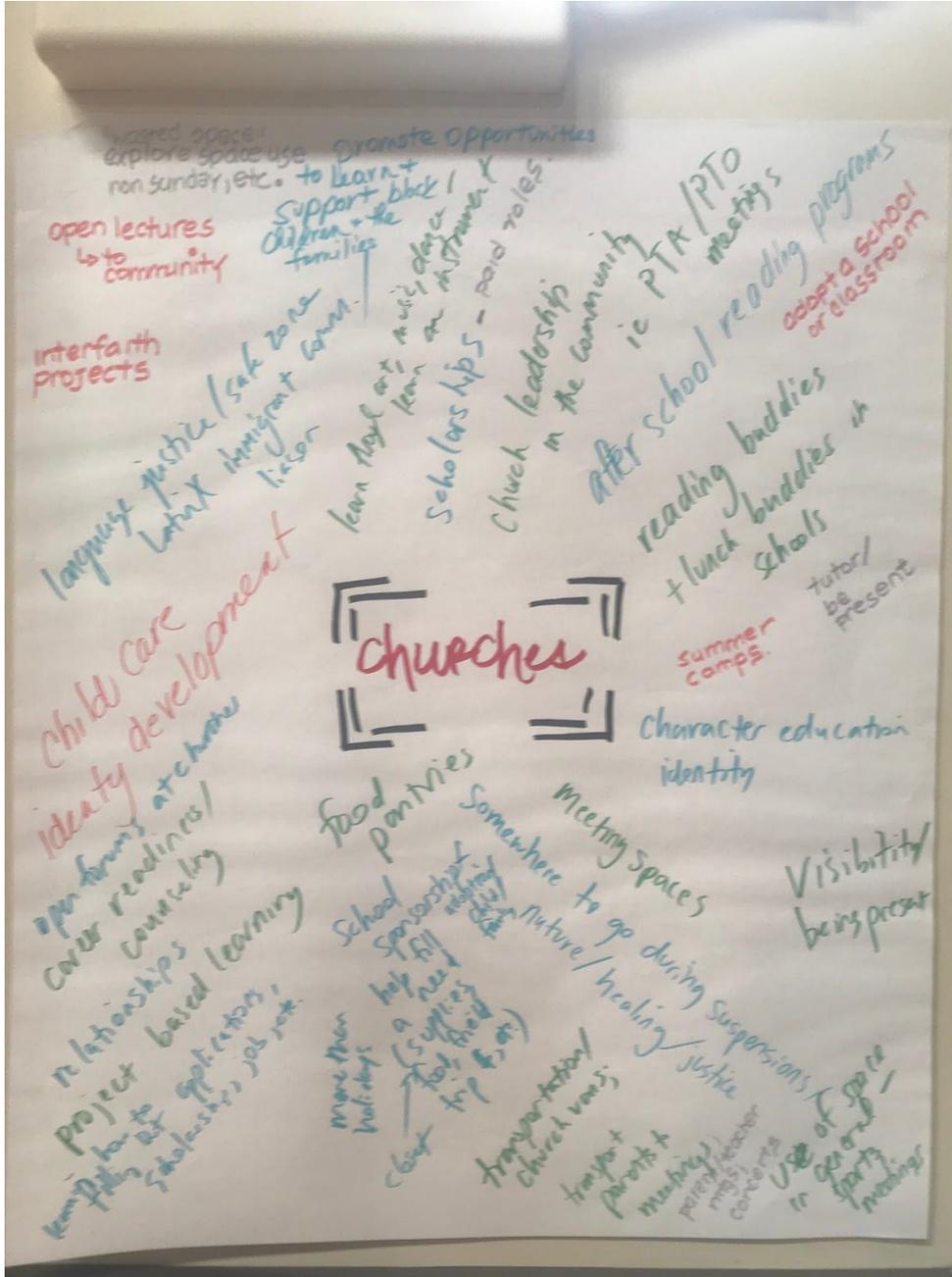


## Strategy + Community Assets: Churches (#2)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Open lectures to community.
- Interfaith projects.
- Language justice/safe zone by way of Latinx immigrant community liaison.
- Offering childcare at services and beyond in the community.
- Ideation development - open forums at churches, job/business readiness + counseling, relationships, project-based learning, workshops on filling out applications to secure needed resources (i.e. jobs, internships, scholarships, etc.)
- Food pantries that are open to the community + schools.
- Promote opportunities to learn and support black children + families.
- Host spaces where youth can learn through art, music, dance, and learn an instrument.
- Scholarships and paid roles for youth and young professionals.
- Church leadership has more presence in the community (i.e. PTA/PTO mtgs).
- Provide meeting space.
- Serve as a place to go during suspensions to nurture and provide healing justice.
- Support community org/afterschool transport needs with church vans.
- Support parent/family transport needs to get to meetings, shows, parent/teacher confs.
- Engage with the community on more than just holidays.
- Serve to help fill the gaps for student need (i.e. toiletries, food, field trip \$, clothes, etc.).
- Engage existing or creating a new space for summer camps.
- Character education and identity support.
- Visibility! Show up and be present when parents and families aren't able to.

- Provide tutoring, reading buddies, lunch buddies in schools, afterschool reading, etc..
- Churches can adopt a school or a classroom to provide support year-round.



## Strategy + Community Assets: Community Organizations (#3)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Informing leadership (of people of color) and getting “buy-in”.
- Tapping into community organizations leadership - knowledge + expertise.
- Black children seeing black leaders, leading.
- Professional development for this work into structures being mandatory.
- Alternative learning opportunities (i.e. wilderness leadership trip - Outward Bound, etc.).
- Connection of siloed community orgs through symposiums and discuss and share around early warning response system (EWRS).
- Asheville (the City) having a strategic Black child development plan to unify + divest community orgs to close opportunity gap (connect vs. compete).
- Community orgs being a liaison between parents, parent leadership + schools.
- Redirection of funds + sponsorship of local, informed Black community organizations, and move away from outer-state, white-led organizations.
- Building behavior management skill set for our teachers through community org education and trainings.

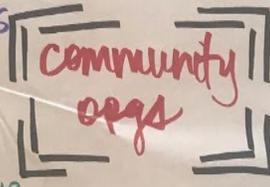
• Informing leadership - getting "buy-in" of people of color

• Tapping into community organizations leadership - knowlege & expertise

• Black kids seeing black leaders leading

• Professional development for this work into structures (mandantory)

• Alternative learning opps.  
I.e. wilderness leadership trip. (Outward Bound)



• Connection of silo'ed community orgs → symposiums

(EWRS)  
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• Redirection of funds ↓ sponsorship of local; informed Black community organizations.  
(Away from out-of-state, white lead orgs)

• Asheville (the city) having a specific, strategic Black child development plan to unify + direct community orgs to close opp. gap (connect vs compete)

• Building behavior management skill set of our teachers through community org education + trainings

• Comm orgs being a liezon between parents, parent leadership, + schools

## Strategy + Community Assets: Community Organizers + Activists (#4)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Uniform, shared vision of equity.
- Step into abundance mentality.
- Combine efforts, move out of silos.
- Know + understanding our local history + current impact.
- Promote opportunities for people to learn or support Black children.
- Common space or website with bio & contact info of local experts, organizers + activists.
- Support activists from within the system.
- Get rid of school leaders & teachers who are not engaged in activism efforts.
- Teachers being able to advocate for themselves.
- Listen to community experts.
- Mandatory training + in-class involvement for leadership and administration of schools.
- ACS having more transparent and open communication.
- Bring in local equity consultants to work with administrators of schools.
- Providing wellness + yoga trainer for Black students.
- Realize that it's time to rebuild the house!
- Create specific accountability criteria + implementation with community oversight.
- All admin and teachers taking Building Bridges + REI.
- Have the conversation about “excellence with equity”. What does this mean exactly?

### *People + Places*

- NCAE
- ACAE

Common space/  
website + bio and  
contact info of local  
experts, organizers,  
activists

# Uniform shared vision of equity

Have the conversation about "excellence with equity"  
What does this mean?

Specific  
Accountability  
Criteria +  
Implementation w/  
Community  
oversight

## Know - Understanding our local history & current impact

All admin's  
teachers taking  
building surveys,  
LEA

## Step into abundance mentality

It's Time to  
rebuild the house!

Promote opportunities  
for people to learn  
support black  
children.

# community organizers + activists

Get rid of  
school leaders/teachers  
who are not???

Support  
professors from  
within the  
system

TEACHING  
WELLNESS + HIGH TEACHER  
STUDENT'S

## Combine efforts - move out of silos

Mandatory  
training + in-class  
involvement for  
leadership/  
administration

## ACS / schools transparent / open communication

Teachers  
advocate  
for members  
MCR  
ACRE

## Listen to Community experts

Bring in local consultants  
(ie Tepayar, Ambrose, Work w/  
Adaway) to Admins  
of Schools

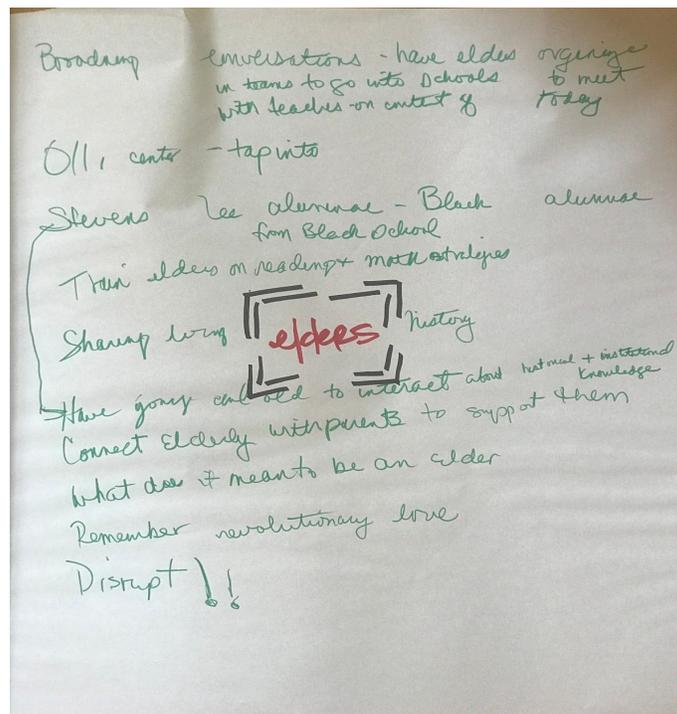
## Strategy + Community Assets: Elders (#5)

### Strategy + Action

- Remember revolutionary love!
- Disrupt the exclusion of elders in community and organizing spaces.
- What does it mean to be an elder?
- Connect elders with parents in need of support and see about mutual aid/benefit.
- Have youth and elders engage and interact about natural and institutional knowledge.
- Sharing and learning history of the community.
- Train elders on reading and math strategies to be able to activate homework support.
- Establish potential teams of elders to organize, cluster in teams to go into schools to meet with teachers in context of what's needed for the present day.

### People + Places

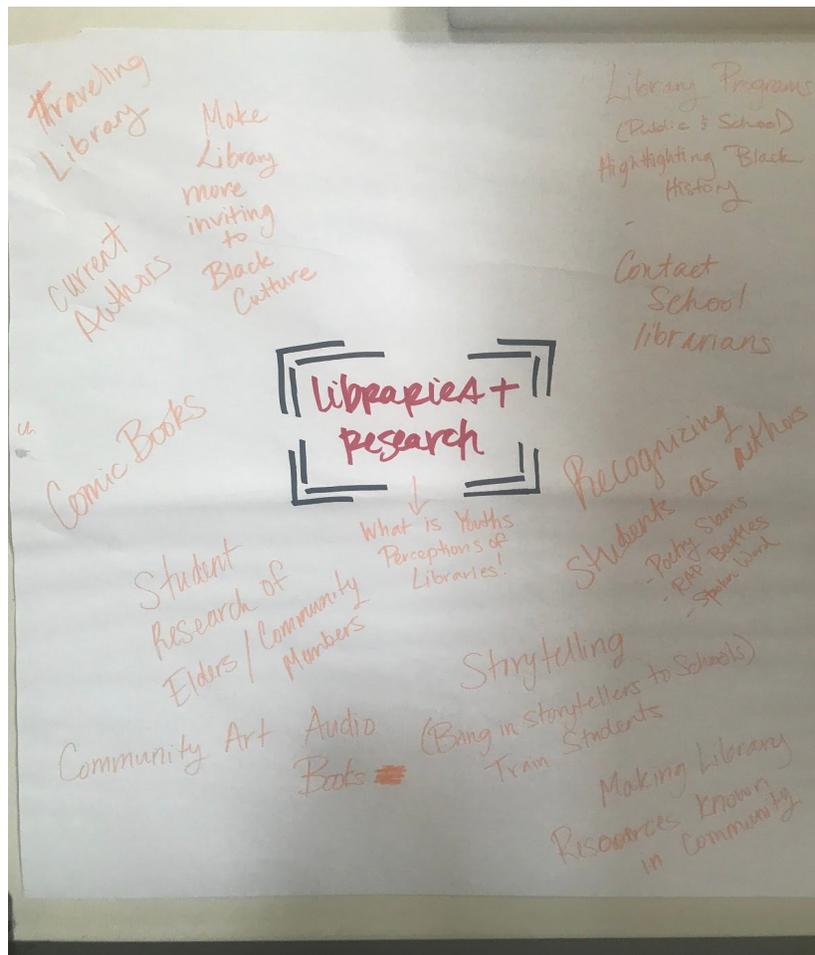
- Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI)
- Stephens-Lee alumni



## Strategy + Community Assets: Libraries + Research (#6)

### Strategy + Action

- Traveling library that can go around to different community sites + locations.
- Current, local authors that engage with schools and students.
- Support interest in comic books, and perhaps the creation of one.
- Student research projects on elders, community members, and artifacts.
- Audio books!
- What is the youth perception of libraries?
- Storytelling - bring in storytellers to schools and train students.
- Making library resources more known in the community.
- Recognizing students as authors through poetry slams, rap battles, and spoken word.
- Contact school librarians to get a sense of youth engagement, usage + resources.
- Make library more inviting to Black culture.
- Library programs (public + school) that highlight and center Black history.



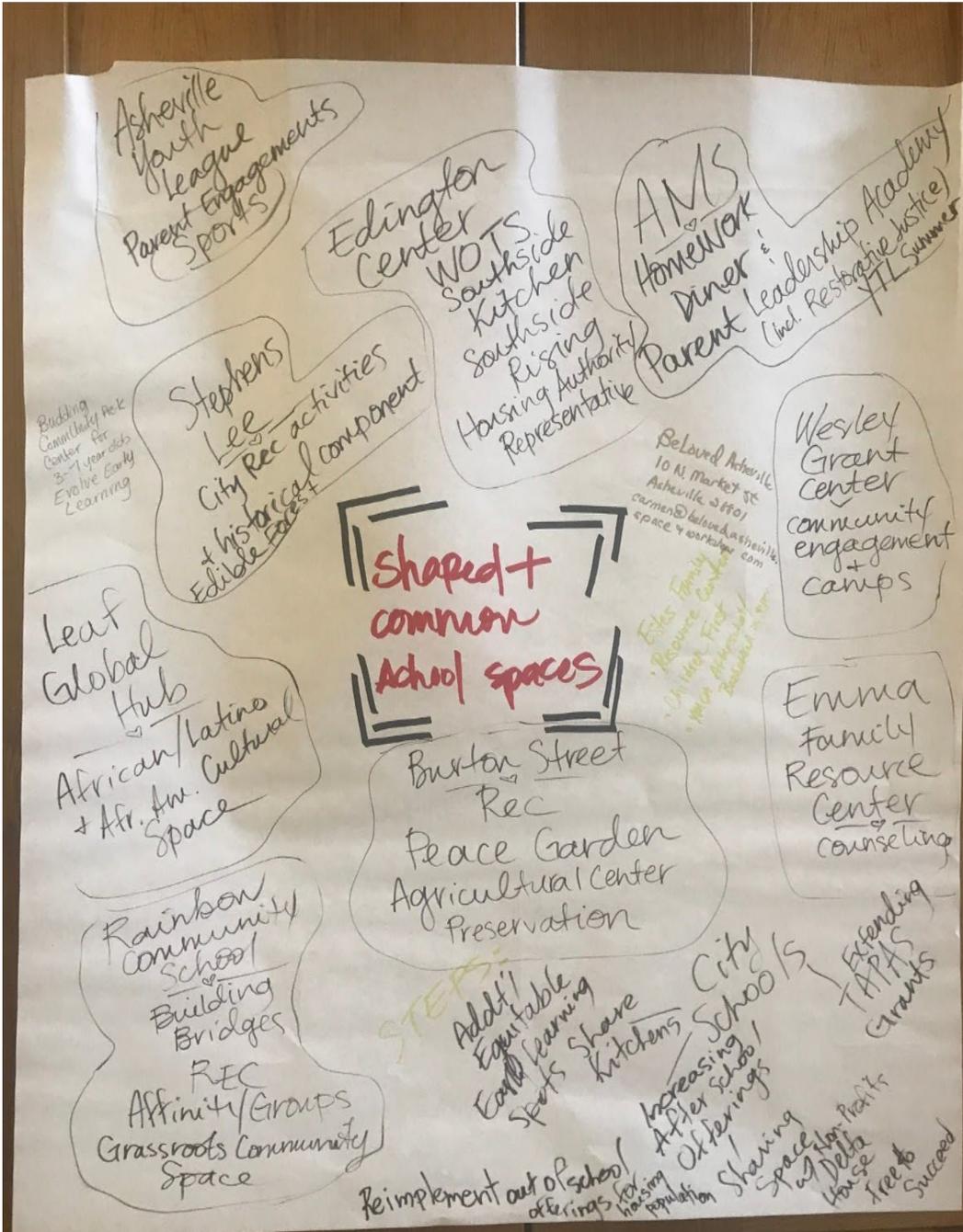
## Strategy + Community Assets: Shared + Common School Spaces (#7)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Blossoming of a community pre-K center for 3 to 7-year-olds - Evolve Early Learning.
- Forming of additional equitable learning spots, shared kitchens, and meeting spaces.
- ACS extending of TAPAs grants to cover use of school spaces.
- Increasing of afterschool offerings, and reimplement out-of-school offerings for the housing population.
- Sharing space with nonprofits that already have space (i.e. Delta House, STEAM, etc.).

### *People + Places*

- Asheville Middle School (AMS) Homework Diner
- Asheville Middle School (AMS) Parent Leadership Academy (incl. Restorative Justice + YTL summer programming)
- Edington Center
- Word on the Street/La Voz de los Jóvenes
- Southside Kitchen
- Southside Rising
- Asheville Housing Authority Representative
- Wesley Grant Center - community engagement + camps
- Emma Family Resources Center - counseling
- Burton Street Recreation Center
- Burton Street Peace Gardens - agricultural center preservation
- Rainbow Community School - grassroots comm space, trainings, learning
- Stephens-Lee - city recreation activities, historical component
- Asheville Youth League - parent engagement through sports
- Beloved Asheville - space and workshops for the community
- Estes Family Resource Center
- Children First/Communities in Schools program locations
- YMCA Afterschool/Youth Sports Activities



## Strategy + Community Assets: Food Access Orgs + Community Gardens (#8)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Food pantries and/or farmers markets in school parking lots... and this may be happening in Fairview and at Isaac Dickson.
- Growing minds thru A.S.A.P. (Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Program), \$\$ grants.
- Universal breakfast + lunch for all students and not just for the “underprivileged”.
- Many services are K-12, but more is needed for 0-5 (pre-school).
- Manna backpacks are something that happens, and includes recipes, but is this enough?
- Manna backpacks may also be furthering/contributing to stereotypes between kids.
- Access to cooking courses or cooking space - IRL + ASAP may be an opportunity.
- Transportation to resources, food access, community gardens, etc..
- Community gardens need harvest and uptake - can AmeriCorps help with this?
- Food commodity reserve program at TJ & others - how can we get schools to rescue these or reduce waste?
- Little payback from NCA - National Communication Association, but potential here.
- Verner Learning Center, “Rainbow in my Tummy”.

### *People + Places*

- Bountiful Cities
- Homework Diners
- Manna
- A.S.A.P. (Appalachian Sustainable Agricultural Program)

- Bountiful Cities ed program \* See Schools Below

- Homework Diners

- food pantry @  
School parking lots

- [Fairview, Dickson)  
Growing Minds through ASAP grants

- Manna backpacks (includes recipes)  
might contrib to stereotypes, unweildy for <sup>the kids</sup> but is this enough?

- universal breakfast + lunch

- many services are K-12; need more  $\phi$  to 5

food access  
orgs + community  
gardens

- transportation to resources

- Cooking: ASAP & IRL might teach

- Verner "Rainbow in My Tummy" is \$B ... little pay back from NCACFP

- Food Commodity rescue program @ TJ & others; how can we get schools to rescue these or reduce waste

*Eske Elementary School Garden  
Hill Fletcher Garden  
Vance Garden*

- FOOD waste in schools (toss expired food) fast)

- Community gardens need harvest + uptake. AmeriCorp help w/ this?

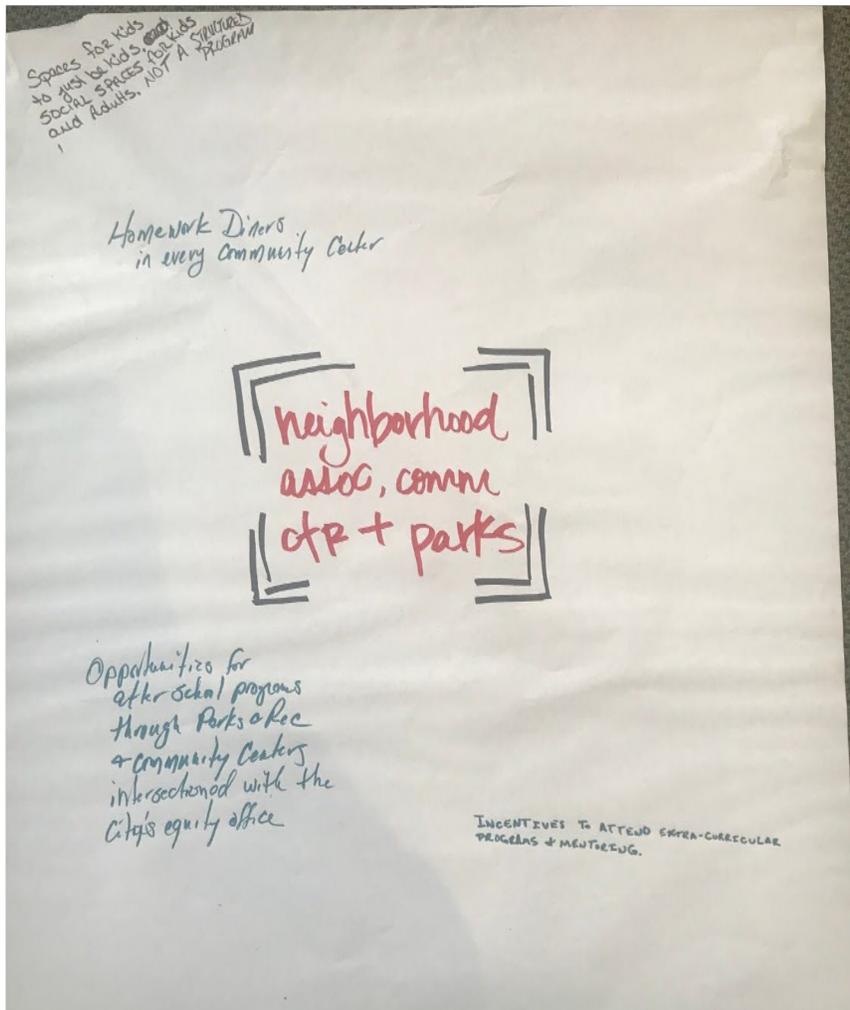
## Strategy + Community Assets: Neighborhood Assoc., Comm Centers + Parks (#9)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Homework Diners taking place in every community center.
- Spaces for kids to be kids... social spaces for kids and adults and no structured agenda.
- Incentives to attend extra-curricular activities and community programs.
- Opportunities for after-school programs through Parks & Rec and community centers intersecting with the City's Equity & Inclusion office.

### *People + Places*

- Local community centers.



## Strategy + Community Assets: Universities + Colleges (#10)

### *Strategy + Action*

- Specialized certification programs focused on equity - will help recruitment. Certification programs could happen in summer in Asheville, and create a draw to Asheville.
- Pay for and require all teachers go to Building Bridges + REI over the summer months.
- Make more visible hiring or opportunity-driven initiatives that will drive faculty of color in predominantly white schools.
- Learn the history of predominantly white schools and historically Black schools.
- Open the doors!
- Share the space, and resources.
- Recruitment of and outreach for local children of color.
- Mentorship!
- Invite local students to campuses with local community days, “Open House” style.
- Strategically place more Black teachers in classrooms.
- Create a community that supports families and students of color.
- Focus recruitment of education majors on education as the best place to work for school justice and educational equity.
- White teachers assuming responsibility for self-education about best practices for equitable + just classrooms.
- Reimagine learning through a think-tank or additional symposium!
- Need teachers’ lounge, community teachers, community teachers’ lounge, that is focused on building community through identity.

### *People + Places*

- UNC Asheville
- AB-Tech University
- Lenoir-Rhyne University
- Western Carolina University
- AVID
- Asheville City Schools
- Buncombe County Schools
- Charter Schools
- Private Schools
- Primary + Preschools

UNCA  
 AB tech  
 LRU  
 ACS  
 BCS  
 Charter Schools  
 Private Schools  
 Primary/Preschools

AVID-izing throughout ACS  
 Specialized cert. focused on equity - will help recruitment. Programs could happen in summer in Asheville. People want to come to AVL.

Focus recruitment of education majors on education as the best place to work for social justice + equity.

While techs assume responsibility for self-education about best practices for equitable classrooms

Pro for + required teachers to go to build Bridges/ do it in summer (County, etc)  
 PREI

**Universities + comm colleges + learning spaces**

Reimagine learning with that work

Need Community Teachers = Teacher of Color

open the doors

mentorship invite students on campus

share the space & resources

recruitment + outreach of local children of color -

Black teachers in classroom

hiring or opportunity initiative  
 Faculty of color  
 Predominantly white schools learn their history

create a community that support families of color

## Conclusion

What did we just hear?

- Knowing the research just means that we are informed.
- Grounding and moving from strengths + taking inventory of assets is the way forward, both for Black youth in the schools, and also for the community at-large.

The facts from today

- Community is the key to ACTION.
- Culture is the foundation of IDENTITY.
- Giving what is needed is EQUITY + INCLUSION, therefore it is JUSTICE.

The youth spoke...

- Can you see us?
- Why don't you know us?

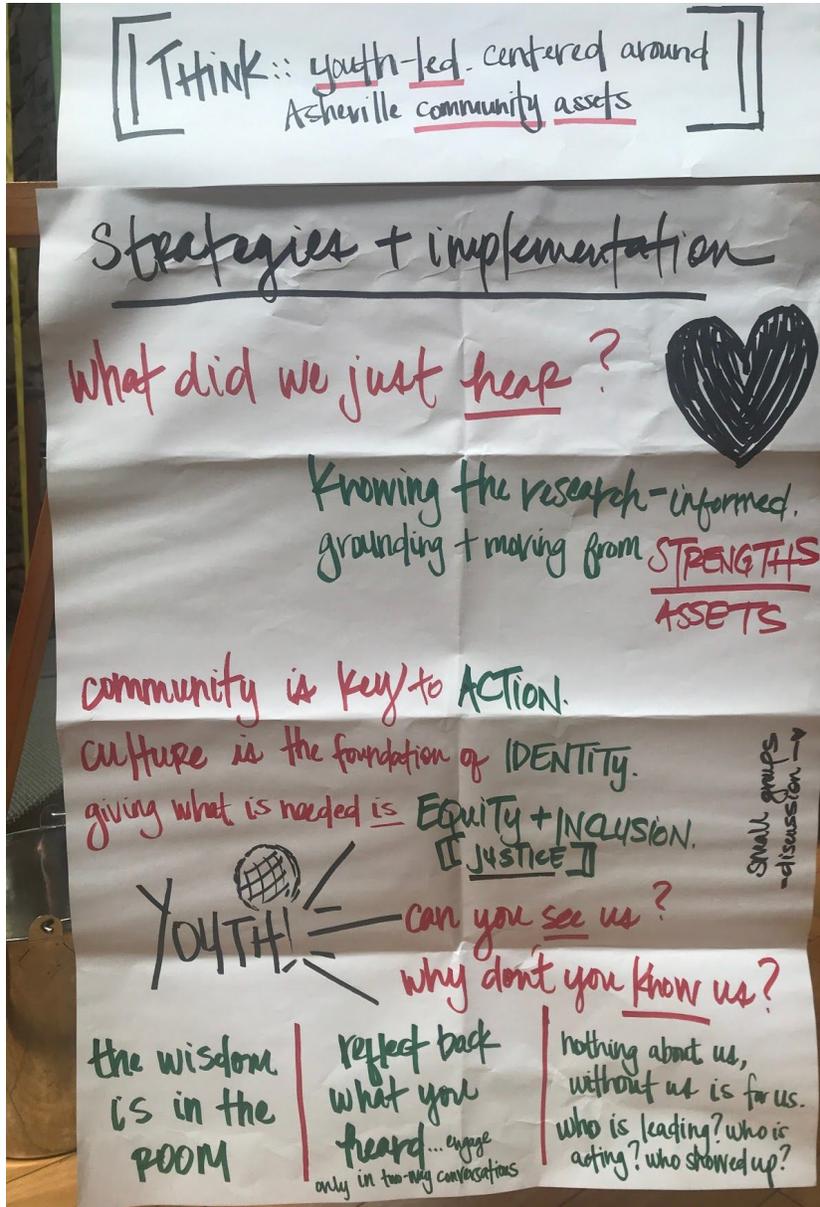
Reflect back in words + Actions

- The wisdom is in the room. In other words, we have what we need, and we have the people we need to move things forward. If we think not, we only need to check the room.
- Reflect back what you heard and engage only in two-way conversations.
- Nothing about us, without us, is for us. Check: who is leading? Who is acting? Who showed up... and what role do they have as things move forward?

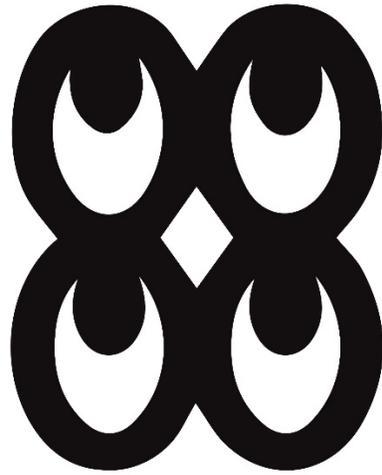
## Strategies + implementation

What practical steps  
can be implemented immediately  
that would change academic  
outcomes for Black  
children in our area?

[ Think :: youth-led. centered around  
Asheville community assets ]



Author Note: Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Cortina Jenelle Caldwell, Artists Designing Evolution, LLC , email: [connect@theadeproject.org](mailto:connect@theadeproject.org) .



## Author Biographies

Scholars featured in this inaugural special edition used poetry as an introduction of themselves. The different poems are a tapestry of experiences and identities that describe who they are. These poems exemplify Black excellence and movement towards epistemic liberation.



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

**Agya Boakye-Boaten, Ph.D.**

**Me yɛ**

Each day I step out of my door  
The rising sun brings opportunities of a hustle  
The morning showers make the grass green  
The sun is supposed to dry my tears  
The breeze is supposed to calm my anxiety  
Awaiting in the dark corners is the whimper  
Wanting to influence the outcome of my hustle  
I surge ahead with my head high, not knowing if that is my last breath  
They say do not fear, for you walk not alone  
Fire rages all around me, tearing within my tranquility to devour  
I hold onto my inner desires of strength, fingers on the tips of hope  
Which compares not to the darkness of six feet under  
My soul roams in the sea of unknown despair  
Haunted by the shadows of wickedness, dimming the glimmer of light  
The rivers and the birds, violent screams of anguish, can be heard afar  
The bones of my heart pierce the darkness of night  
On the horizon is the trail of our gallant ancestors  
Me yɛ a son of Asante Kotoko, Wo kum apem, a apem beba  
A descendant of the land of the elephants  
A son of the seas that never stop boiling  
Bretuo ba, Boakyetenten Nana, Asonomaso dekye  
Me yɛ Boakyeba!



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

**Cortina Jenelle Caldwell, M.A.**

*Organizer, Facilitator & Entrepreneur*

*My first love was words. I understood their power, presence, and possibility. They have the power to create new worlds and shape our experiences. These are the words that make the canvas of me.*

## **Who Am I?**

### **I am courage and humility.**

I came into the world at Grace Hospital in Morganton, NC on July 21, 1986. My mother and I had a full summer month together before she had to return back to high school in the Fall. I remember sitting in my high school Economics class the day that September 11, 2001 descended on the world, wondering how I could be in a place called Freedom (High), and feel that I had no say in what went on in the world around me. What was freedom? Freedom was not my home life—riddled with drug deals, cries of agony and pain from fists landing all over the body, the uncertainty of if we would have food, or hot water that night. Freedom was learning how to make my own clothes, learning to cook, and seeking out enrichment programs to put me around other dreamers and doers. Freedom was a rite of passage for my independence, a hand of cards that, if played carefully, could lead to my getting out of Morganton and not becoming a statistic; a space to liberate myself from the stronghold of poverty and oppression that had intoxicated my entire family. More importantly, freedom looked like breaking the silence and daring to dance in my light. In Asheville, 61%, or 2,264 single black mothers, live below the poverty line (American Community Survey), and for our small town roots in Morganton, there was deep judgement about the lives and livelihoods of single black mothers, leaving only the jobs that the white working class did not want. The humiliation of my mother became my humility and I was determined to let no one write my story for me, but me. Come Spring semester of my senior year, I had designed a new plan for my life and earned a place amongst the Class of 2004 Gate Millennium Scholars, a program of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Marianne Williamson said in *Return to Love*, “Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, ‘Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?’ Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously

give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.” I was now 1 in 1,000. I was on my way to becoming a trailblazer and artistic revolutionary.

I wonder if the world will ever realize that we can design the new thing.  
I hear mycelium growing beneath our feet, stretching for connection.  
I see the dawn of a new era where the artists lead the way.  
I want what comes after hope.

### **I am the descendant of Appalachian, Southern, West African, indigenous creativity.**

James Baldwin once said, “To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time.” How do I stop being enraged? How else can I be using my energy? Over the last 5-10 years, I have been on an internal and cultural pilgrimage to understand my origin story and the connection of experiences and legacies that had to intersect and flow to form my personal reality today. Growing up in the poor rural South, I saw myself as a human being, but often felt alien in my beliefs about what was possible for my life in spite of being Black. While I still carry that same notion of oneness and humanity at a deeper level of my existence, I also realize the reality that in the world we live in I do not have the luxury of not recognizing my Blackness because others have historically made laws to limit and govern my Blackness. And furthermore, that every comment or snide remark someone made to me as a child about what was or was not “Black”, was simply regurgitating some internalized oppression. Those individuals had themselves received a limiting definition of what it meant and looked like to be Black. There was a period in college and in early adulthood where as I was going through my “coming out” phase; I identified as an LGBTQ person first, before my Blackness, but then being in mostly LGBTQ spaces and seeing how lacking Black or Brown folks were in those spaces, those same old conversations about what was and was not for my (Black) people came flooding back in.

This is when I made a clear decision that I was going to move through the world as a whole, integrated person and that I was tired of leaving parts of my identity behind.

My great-great-grandmother was a Black indigenous Cherokee woman living in between the borders of North and South Carolina in rural Rutherford county. Although I do not yet know her name, the desire to know her and her story—therefore my story—catapulted me on a journey to uncover my lost origin. I knew I was born to a teenage mother, but that was not the full sum of all of my parts, and certainly not good enough for this curious-minded scholar. In my search, I found that most of the African Americans that have called North Carolina, South Carolina, Maryland, and Virginia home have ancestral ties back to West Africa, in areas that we know as Nigeria, the Republic of the Congo, Republic of Cameroon, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Benin, and Togo. Through those studies, I uncovered that my personal lineage is comprised of 50% Nigerian roots. Although the enslaved life was the case for those who were brought to the region, others came as indentured servants to the region, and even a few more had gained their freedom. The treatment of Black Americans by their white counterparts was fueled by the fear of their power, and there were very intentional acts to suppress their rights before and after emancipation. Resilience and the daring act to exist and create a life was the Black community’s response to being shut out of education, suffrage, and daily freedoms; thus the community created new and

unique forms of self-expression. Religion became a pathway to literacy and music was a form of communication, through freedom songs, hymns, even drum rhythm-like movements intended on simply keeping the people connected to the Motherland, but ultimately sparking the creation of many musical genres that persist today. I challenge people to expand what it looks like or means to be a woman, to be Queer, to be Two-Spirit and/or androgynous, and for the sake of all of my ancestors who have given their lives to be seen as fully human—I dare to live by my own definition of what it means to be Black.

I understand that Black lives matter.

I say that in order to change something, we must be the ones we need.

I dream that we see beyond what's comfortable and embrace the radical.

I try every day to begin anew, and always do my best.

I hope that I leave the world better than I found it.

**I am courage and humility.**

My ancestral roots tell an important story, and are just as relevant to my present as they will be to my future. I come from people who were artists, farmers, musicians, educators, organizers, innovators, entrepreneurs, and what the world would call radicals. There is nothing radical about choosing how you want to live your life, and the fact that autonomy and agency can be perceived as radical should be telling about the rigidity and limitations placed on lives thought to be “inferior” to the majority. My family roots tell the story of what not to do, and give examples of what it looks like when you surrender to your limiting beliefs. My educational roots started when I fell in love with words as a young child and stayed with me as I completed my Bachelor of Science in Education, Business & Social Science, and then went on to earn my Masters of Art in Management & Leadership. These roots served as my foundation to name and tell a new story; all there was left to do was to create it. My entrepreneurial roots and facilitation roots were planted early by the fearlessness I witnessed in my grandmother's journey to starting and running a successful business, as well as my own need to mediate conflict and hard conversations with others around me. Since 2007, I have designed, produced, or facilitated hundreds of trainings, workshops, programs, and community events centered on authenticity, community building, creativity, entrepreneurship, innovation, and leadership across the Southeast. In that time, I have worked alongside nonprofits, entrepreneurs, educators, community leaders, artists, festival producers, conference organizers, small businesses, and activists alike. Each day, I rise and am renewed in my breath that has not yet been stolen, in my hope that has not yet been squelched, and in the love I have cultivated for all my parts, and in the firm knowing that I am descendent of a free, beautiful, and powerful people. I am Black. I am human. I pretend to dance through the sky with wings when I need upliftment.

I feel the rhythm of the stolen drums calling us home.

I touch ancient history when I lean into the forest.

I worry that the Earth may eject us for mistreating her resources.

I cry like a mother who feels her children in pain.

**I am courage and humility.**



An Interdisciplinary Journal of Africana Studies

August 2020 – Volume 1 Issue 1

**Summer Carrol, Ph.D.**

**Unfinished: My Journey to Who I Am**

*"You are the sum total of everything you've ever seen, heard, eaten, smelled, been told, forgot - it's all there. Everything influences each of us ..."* Maya Angelou

It is in the spirit of Maya Angelou's quote that I proceed along in my journey to who I am and where I'm from.

My journey to knowing all of me and all of where I am from is incomplete. I am learning that the process of unpacking one's identity is not linear; one cannot simply move from point A to point B and say "that's me." Well, maybe some can, but I cannot. There are too many layers, too many experiences to sift through, too much history to uncover, too many influences. Not to mention that there are so many unknowns, things we do not know about the people and places connected to our lives, as well as the people and places that have influenced who we are. We do have license to assert the identities we choose and to reject labels that have been ascribed to us. We can acknowledge and reflect on how we came to be who we are or we can ignore or deny the impact experiences have on us. I believe we know whatever it is God desires us to know, but only if we are willing to seek out that knowledge. This narrative represents my journey in progress—the results of my seeking, and reflections on what I have found. I invite you in for a glimpse of the unfolding journey of my attempt to understand the connections between where I'm from and who I am.

**I am from racism.**

*I am a survivor.*

The brick crashed through the front window from somewhere near the creek that streamed from the front of the house to the backyard. I was cocooned within my mother's womb as she sat on the couch just inches away from where the brick landed. The house was in Willoughby Hills, Ohio, a rural area where my family was one of only two black families in the neighborhood. It

was a storybook home: a split level on lots of land, surrounded by trees, and bordered by a meandering stream. My dad was shocked when our family became the targets of racial violence. My dad grew up in a predominantly white and Italian working-class neighborhood, went to a predominantly white school, and was comfortable around white people. According to my mother, he did not understand why our family seemed to be unwelcomed in the neighborhood. “He was never the same after that,” she said. “I think he couldn’t believe the white people treated him so badly.” The property defacement and racial slurs my family endured while living there were frightening, so much so that they sent my sister who was then five years old to live with family elsewhere while they prepared for the move. My father worked long hours as an advertising account executive during that time and my mother was often alone in the home, with me in her womb. I imagine I felt her fear and confusion and uncertainty and I also felt her determination to move us to a safer place of peace and inclusion. After many calls to the police and an FBI investigation, my parents learned the perpetrators were the children of the physician who lived only a few doors down. *Neighbors*. The year was 1977.

As my physical body was developing, wicked forces were already hard at work on killing my spirit. But, like my mother and the many women and men before her who endured even harsher attacks, I am a survivor.

**I am from faith.**

***I am a child God.***

I come from a legacy of faith, so I know that what the devil means for bad, God uses for good, and I know that while the disease of racial strife was infiltrating my life before I was even born, that my birth was a good idea—God’s good idea. It was God’s idea that I have breath and become a human being and that I be of African descent. It was God’s idea that I *be*, and I am ultimately *from* God. I am from God’s genius and creativity, from God’s love and intellect; I am from God’s power and compassion; and I am from God’s wrath. The spirit that is housed in my body is the same spirit of the living God. These are the truths I rest in.

**I am from integration and the perks of privilege.**

***I am a dreamer unlearning naïveté.***

When we left the house in Willoughby Hills just before I was born, we moved to the newly integrating suburb of Cleveland Heights, Ohio, where I would spend my elementary, middle, and some of my high school years. This home, in a progressive, family-oriented community, served as the backdrop for my formative years. It was the background for all of the scenes that played out in my life.

*I am from green ivy and weeping willows, from digging for worms and catching butterflies, bees, and lightning bugs; from steep descents on ravine hikes, dips in the creek and courageous climbs back up to the backyard; I'm from bike riding on dirt hills; from neighborhood talent shows and Fourth of July-lit skies at Grandma and Pa pa's; from fresh peaches from Grandma's peach tree and from peanut butter and jelly snacks greeting me after school; I'm from Daddy's riding lawn mower and from a stay-at-home mom; from ice cream sandwiches and ice cream trucks, from high water, low water, and Double Dutch on Dunham Avenue in the Hough community of Cleveland, Ohio.*

**I am from the House off of Hough.**

*I am a seeker who values the past on the path to the future.*

Off of Hough Road is where my grandmother lived and where my mother was raised shortly after her family of 13 joined The Great Migration and migrated from the southern coal mines of Roda, Virginia to Cleveland, Ohio. It is where the family gathered for all types of special occasions and for no occasion at all. It is where cousins sat on steps and aunties and uncles on metal or wicker chairs on the front porch, watching the comings and goings on the street, telling and listening to stories... "My'a Ann, My'a Ann..." "Ma'am?" My childhood memories don't recall the topic of all of the stories, but my heart recalls the belly laughs, the thigh slapping, and the spontaneous re-enactments and impersonations of family matters and family members. I also remember just sitting there, admiring the flower gardens and hanging plants, and just chatting about life while Grandma nursed a cup full of cubes of ice.

*Green and white and four stories high, the House off of Hough is a home that stands majestically in my memories as a symbol of family, fun, fellowship, and stability. The parts of me that cherish family fiercely and that hold fast to my goals and dreams, the parts of me that lift my eyes to the hills when I need help, the parts of me that love and laugh—anyways—these parts are inspired by the legacy of the House off of Hough.*

*As I move forward, I draw courage from looking back.*

**I am from Africa and America.**

Two DNA lines run through my blood, one originated in Guinea-Bissau, a West African country once colonized by the Portuguese, and the other in Sierra Leone, a West African country once colonized by the British. I am a descendant of Africans enslaved by European descendants in America; I am an Americanized African who has been labeled by the government as Black. I have always thought that an inaccurate label—not only because it is a social construction created by white men to empower white people and disempower those they would call black or colored—but also because the color simply does not describe my skin complexion. Still, I come

from the culture associated with Blackness in America, the African American Culture. I am an African American.

**I am from “Lost at Sea” and Found.**

***I am a Daughter.***

I am from a gulf that exists between the American and the African in me, the part of my identity lost at sea and on the cotton fields; I am from Africans whose descendants say that we are not cut from the same cloth, that they in all of their indigenous African do not identify with me, a black American, an African American. I am from that disconnect, that stolen, thrashed identity, that was perverted at sea and then whitewashed ashore into a new forced identity. But there is beauty from the ashes, new life from the lost; the me that was God’s idea survives.

I am from mothers and grandmothers and great grandmothers who birthed new generations of black children. I am from Myra, born 1949; from Lucille, born 1925; from Curley, born 1907; from Annice, born 1875, from Caroline, born 1851, from generations whose identities I still seek; I am from a Mende woman in Sierra Leone, West Africa. I am a daughter who continues the legacy of mothering.

I am from mothers who took care of their children by any means necessary, from fathers who worked and provided no matter what. I am from rice, cassava, and the Atlantic Ocean, from Jim Crow and slavery’s legacy and The Emancipation Proclamation and from the leadership, the front-line shoulders, and the families of The Civil Rights Movement. I am from *Brown* and bussing and from Women’s liberation and from spiritual awakenings and renewals, from Christ.

“Everything influences each of us...” Angelou reminds. Everything. “We teach who we are<sup>1</sup>.”

What have you learned during your brief glimpse into my journey, into some of what makes me who I am? What do you now want to know? About me? About yourself? About others?

What will you do with this narrative that has now become a part of you?

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<sup>1</sup> Parker Palmer (1998). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher’s life*



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## **I am**

**Itiyopiya Ewart, M.A.T.**

### **I am Itiyopiya.**

Veronica and Habte's daughter. Granddaughter of Birdie and Tom, and Elnora and James. Black, woman, she, cis-gendered, hetero and BK all day.

### **I hear the voices of my ancestors.**

They comfort and guide me. They encourage me to live my dreams. They support me in fighting for my freedom.

### **I embody resilience + resistance + radiance.**

I grew up on the edges of where academia met with street life, where Rastafari met with Black Power and where incessant pain was met with unrelenting hope. My parents and family schooled me on Black liberation and its deep-rooted connection to Black love. My life's journey has guided me in dismantling beliefs I may hold that are harmful to my well-being and my quality of life.

### **I am a lover of family, language, arts, and culture.**

I have the great honor of being Mom to the dynamic duo, Tatek and Trelawney. I come from proud people who taught me to adore African American Vernacular English and Patois. Forged from my upbringing, I hold a love and curiosity about people and their personal stories. I have the privilege of formal education and globe trekking.

### **I dream of a world where my children and their children experience safety in being who they are.**

A world free of anti-Blackness, where they can see diverse positive images of themselves. Where their hair, as it grows out of their scalp, is treasured. A world where they can just be themselves. Where they experience joy, opportunity, access, and a high quality of life.

### **I understand that the foundation of white supremacy is anti-Blackness and that these systems of injustice do not want to change.**

And, with my ancestors behind me and my family and community beside me, I trod on for justice.



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**Joseph L. Fox, Ed.D.**

*Educator, Consultant, and Executive Coach*

**Who am I?**

**I am the son of the late Hazel B. Fox and William David Fox**, born in Tryon, NC. In the words of my “Angel Mom,” who sometimes worked two and three jobs as a single parent to provide for her children, “Education is power! Get as much education as you can because that is the one thing that they cannot take away from you.” This early lesson in the value of education motivated me to receive an Ed.D. and an M.B.A. from Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee, NC, and a B.S. degree in Business Administration from Pfeiffer University, in Misenheimer, NC. It also inspired me to obtain the Professional in Human Resources Management (PHR) National Certification, Global Achieve Leadership Training Certification, and the Rural Entrepreneurship through Action Learning (REAL) Certification.

**I am a lifetime educator** who retired from the North Carolina Community College System after working at several community colleges for twenty-four years. The last seven years of the community college experience was as the Department Chair of Business Administration, leading the Accounting, Business Administration, Entrepreneurship, Human Resources Management, and Marketing & Retail Programs. Past positions include: Lead Accounting instructor, Mitchell Community College, Statesville, NC; Management Program Coordinator, Spartanburg Technical College, Spartanburg, SC; Business Administration instructor, Haywood Community College, Clyde, NC; and Department Chair of Business Administration, Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College, Asheville, NC. I have also served as an adjunct instructor for several area universities, including Western Carolina University, Lenoir-Rhyne University, Warren Wilson University, and Montreat University. I continue to speak on various topics related to organizational analysis, diversity, entrepreneurship, empowerment, and planning for retirement. I am currently the Vice President of Roseland Community Center (Tryon, NC) and serve as a member of the Eastside Citizens Advisory Committee, also in Tryon, NC. I also serve as the Vice President of the Martin Luther King, Jr. Association of Asheville and Buncombe County, and Chair of the Buncombe Community Remembrance Project and the MLK Peace March and Rally. Many of my workshops are affiliated with the Christian Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church, where I served as the Director of Christian Education for the Winston-Salem/Greenville District

and as the Western Zone Lay Ministries Leader for a number of years. My spiritual gifts are now split between St. Luke CME Church (Tryon) and First Christian Church (Black Mountain, NC).

**I am a Black man**, who has been stopped for “Walking While Black,” been a target of racial slurs, and followed in stores. Those individual experiences and community trauma have created a strong, resilient, Black man full of confidence and self-pride, and that has led my work with other Black males through coaching and mentorship. As the founder of the Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College Minority Male Mentoring Program, which evolved into the Minority Student Leadership Academy and now a multicultural student organization, I wanted to make sure that students of color and/or students from low-wealth communities had role models in the College that looked like them, and had full access to all College resources. My experiences as a Black man have greatly influenced my work to incorporate the equity lens into everything that I strive to accomplish and change. Much of my work is focused on eliminating system biases, inequities, and discrimination.

**I am an entrepreneur and owner of Fox Management Consulting Enterprises, LLC**, that specializes in a variety of organizational training for management and employees. Fox Management Consulting Enterprises, LLC, a HUB Certified company, provides excellent employee and managerial training for higher education, organizations, nonprofits, and religious entities in the areas of diversity/inclusion, general management practices & procedures, efficiency management, human resources management, organizational behavioral development, strategic planning, project management, organizational assessment and analysis, entrepreneurial development, as well as ethical business practices. One-on-one life coaching is also available, as well as one-on-one entrepreneurship development planning.



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**Brandi N. Hinnant-Crawford, Ph.D.**

**I Am...**

I am a black mother, trying to be optimistic, while filled with discontent.

I wonder how my skin, my hair, my speech, my style, my sass, my rhythm, my laughter, and my tears make so many question my contributions, my intellect, my authority and my power.

I hear my God and my ancestors urging me to keep my hand to the plow regardless of how things appear.

I see the potential of black youth like glowing auras all around them.

I want justice, pure and simple, to roll like rivers.

I am a black mother, trying to be optimistic, while filled with discontent.

I pretend that I'm not tired and everything is okay.

I feel impelled by unicorn horns and slapped by mermaid tails when I witness the manifestations of hegemony.

I touch the sweet caress of liberty and smell the fragrant perfume of equity.

I worry about the world I have brought my children into, and whether they will make it brighter or whether it will dull their light.

I cry when I watch the news, and the pervasive meanness is on display.

I am a black mother, trying to be optimistic, while filled with discontent.

I understand God has given us power and authority to do good on Earth.

I say don't grow weary in well doing, for in time you shall reap the harvest.

I dream about a world where I don't have to worry about police fearing my son or men assaulting my daughter.

I try to live out my convictions—to seek truth, justice, and equity for all children, especially those who have for too long been neglected.

I hope the world is not as bad as I perceive.

I am a black mother, trying to be optimistic, while filled with discontent.



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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 11<sup>th</sup> 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."



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**Darrius A. Stanley, Ph.D.**

**I am**

I am Black and self-determined  
I wonder when my people will be free  
I hear my ancestors ringing the freedom bell  
I see Afrolantica-- the Black promised land  
I am Black and self-determined

I sometimes pretend that we are all free  
I feel the warmth of the liberated sun  
I touch the Black soil of the promised land  
I worry that freedom is just my imagination  
I cry for my disillusioned brothas' and sistas'  
I am Black and self-determined

I understand that freedom remains an elusive journey  
I say we will get there one faithful day  
I dream that we will arrive on a horse drawn carriage  
I try to retain my hope  
I hope I am not too naïve  
I am Black and self-determined