

Smiling Faces are Sometimes White Allies Who Don't Tell the Truth

By Shawnta S. Barnes - July 13, 2018



When I was a child, I grew up listening to The Temptations because that's the music my mom played when we were doing laundry and that's the music my dad played when we rode in his car. One of those songs The Temptations soulfully sang, "Smiling Faces Sometimes" reminds me of false white allies.

I'm telling you beware,

beware of the handshake

That hides the snake

Listen to me now, beware

Beware of that pat on the back

It just might hold you back

I believe we need people of all backgrounds involved in the work of improving educational outcomes for all kids especially poor kids and kids of color. What do you do when a white ally claims to know better than you what is best for kids of color when you are a person of color? This is a question I have been grappling with lately based on conversations I have had with people of color who constantly find themselves in battles with white allies. All is fun and games and unity until you disagree with white allies. Then, they try to come for you. They try to use their influence and power against you. That's what some people of color keep experiencing.

An educator of color told me that a white person, she had done work with me in the name of helping poor students and students of color, decided that she didn't know what was best and took action against her. She was offered an opportunity to work with teachers who would work with students in some of the most difficult schools. Her gut told her this opportunity wouldn't help the kids she wanted to help, so she declined. The white person, who initially told her about the opportunity said, "Don't you know how hard it is for people to get this opportunity?" All she could hear was, "I offered you, a black person up on this platter and you refused."

She didn't think much about the situation. She had disagreed with this person before as people often do in the work of "doing what is best for kids." Then, she started to hear this white ally, who previously raved to people about all of the work she had done, was now telling people a different story about her.

Smiling faces, smiling faces sometimes

They don't tell the truth

Smiling faces, smiling faces

Tell lies and I got proof

Educational circles are small and it is hard to avoid people. Unfortunately, she learned she wasn't the first person of color that got dissed, dismissed and dragged by this person for having an opinion about the best way to serve children that looked like her that differed from this ally.

This is just one story I was told; there are so many more. I don't understand how white people who claim to be educational allies in helping children of color can go around bad mouthing educators of color, even blocking opportunities for them, without knowing how this harms the children they are allegedly trying to help. It makes me question their real objective for being in the work. This isn't a trend or a fad; we are talking about real children and real devastating consequences if educational outcomes don't improve.

If you are a white ally and you are kicking down people of color who have been in the shoes of the children you claim you are trying to help, then you are no ally. You are a wolf in sheep's clothing. You are only in the social justice movement to promote your own agenda and raise your star. As your star rises, the stars of children that need our help never get off of the ground.

Don't let the handshake and the smile fool ya

Take my advice

I'm only tryin' to school ya

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