



Toxic Teachers Need to Go

By Educator Barnes – February 28, 2020

There is not enough self-care in the world that can shield a person from a toxic work environment. I had a few jobs before I became a K-12 educator. I worked in my dorm's cafeteria, at Villa Pizza in the student union at Purdue, and at a church daycare. The work environment was nice. People were supportive, kind, and courteous. When I accepted my first professional job, I was shocked to learn how toxic the workplace environment could be.

In schools, there are two components that make a workplace toxic, the leadership and the teachers. If you've read my viral piece, [Teachers Quit Principals, Not Schools](#), you know I do not think administrators should be let off of the hook. However, it's time to address those teachers that make the school environment a difficult place to work.

You would think that a person who enters the education profession would have a certain type of character, a personality that meshes well with others. Shouldn't teachers have a servant attitude and assume the best of others? In some schools, this is not the case. It is war, and some teachers are out for blood.

I find it interesting that we preach that teachers should give students a fresh start each day, but then some teachers will not give a fresh start to their colleagues each day. They operate on assumptions and do not bother with seeking out the facts. I worked at a school where a cake would be purchased for your birthday. My birthday is in August. Once I realized this would happen, I requested to not have my birthday celebrated at work. The response was to gossip about me and spread rumors that I must be a Jehovah's Witness. Here's the kicker. They decided to buy a cake anyway and told me I did not need to get any since I did not want to celebrate my birthday. I was told my refusal to celebrate my birthday at work was denying them the opportunity to have cake which is why they got cake despite my request. Did anyone apologize for assuming I was a Jehovah's Witness? Nope! This may seem like a small incident, but small incidents over time pile up.

At this same school, a teacher kept calling me by the name of another black teacher. This other black teacher was petite, had long hair, and wore glasses, but that is where the commonalities ended. She was a different shade of black, taught math when I taught English, and taught on a different floor. Finally, I had enough. I told the teacher to not speak to me. I said, "You are an elective teacher and have everyone in the building. You can remember hundreds of students' names but for some reason, you can't remember my name." Her response was, "I don't understand why you are being so aggressive and rude." Oh, I'm rude. Oh, okay. I just had to walk away at that point. I said, in my head, *Lord, not today*.

How many times have teachers had to have an inner-dialogue, *Lord, not today*, just to make it through the day? This should not be a norm which made me think about a theme I heard last night at the Community Conversation: Retaining Teachers of Color. It was toxicity. Teachers, especially teachers of color, do not want to work in toxic environments where they are mistreated, overlooked, and not heard. Many of the panelists shared experiences that I also had experienced.

The words of Latina panelist Idalmi Acosta resonated with me. She shared how colleagues thought she would not be capable of teaching English, especially grammar. I've been there. "Shawnta, was using slang with students. I don't think she should teach grammar if she's going to talk like that. English teachers should use Standard English." It's called code-switching. I can move from African-American Vernacular English to check students and put them in their place in my black momma voice and then switch back to standard English to teach students how to write compound-complex sentences.

It is not only the comments and assumptions. Some teachers actively try to get you in trouble or undermine. They report everything you do, hoping you'll get in trouble even if you are not doing anything. They will also veto every idea you have until they share it, and then it is okay. Dr. Dennisha Murff, a panelist last night, shared that she also faced a similar experience of white colleagues suggesting ideas after she had previously presented the same idea.

Who wants to go to work day in and day out and work with people who are against you and who don't think you have the skills to do your job? At the end of the day, I have to circle back to school leadership. For some reason, toxic teachers seem to be survivors at schools. Their presence pushes other teachers out the door, and yet, school leaders do nothing. I don't need an administrator to fight all my battles, but I need the administrator to have my back when it gets tough. I need an administrator willing to coach a teacher out of the building or fire a teacher, if that's what it takes, so the school environment is not toxic.

The students know. The students notice how staff members interact with each other. It is not worth it to keep a toxic teacher especially since that typically always means that good teachers will be pushed out the door.