



Race and Equity Talks Have Magnified How Emotionally Unsafe I Feel at My School

By Educator Barnes – June 18, 2020

I don't feel emotionally safe at my current school. Typically, I avoid writing about my current job. I am a middle school academic dean who supervises and evaluates nine educators. I never want any person I supervise to believe I am bashing them online. I'm in a position of power, and I must use it wisely.

Although the majority of my career, I have worked for traditional public schools, I am currently employed by a charter network. The executive director of the charter network, the principal, and other staff members have shared with others and me directly how much of an asset I am to the school. My principal even wrote this in my end of year performance review:

Shawnta always maintains a positive attitude and creates a productive work environment around her. She handles stressful situations with great confidence. She is not afraid of difficulties. She is calm and composed under high pressure. She has a great work ethic. She is detail oriented and meets deadlines. I appreciate how she is highly dependable and whenever she promises to accomplish a task, she does it regardless of the circumstances. I enjoy working alongside Shawnta and I am looking forward to another year!

When I read these words, I was equally filled with joy and sadness. I was happy because I work hard to be the best at every school where I am employed. I believe students deserve a high level of excellence from the administrators and teachers who serve them. I was sad because "stressful situations" and "difficulties" include bullying, harassment, racism, and microaggressions. Let me be direct about the bullying and harassment, a colleague admitted doing that to me. So that's not my words. Despite it all, I have chosen to remain calm. Despite it all, I pushed through and completed tasks. My internal voice said, "Shawnta, you are here to serve the kids."

It is hard to work with people when you don't trust them or feel emotionally safe around them. I assert that too many Black people have learned to play the game of enduring emotionally unsafe environments peacefully, so they won't be seen as a threat or have consequences that show up in a performance review. It is important to me to have an excellent performance review and to be seen in a good light by my principal. I did not want to be the source of complaints, and I wanted to show that I could handle it all, but I am emotionally exhausted.

Now, George Floyd's murder has forced Americans into conversations about racism against Black people. First came the statements of solidarity with the Black community. Now, organizations are having race and equity talks. The executive director of my charter organization is having a listening tour this entire week. I attended the first session earlier in the week. The staff members who attended were Black and Latino; no white staff members attended. This was an opportunity to share our thoughts. I was angry the entire time. I didn't feel safe the entire time. I only shared a fraction of what I wanted to say.

The fraction I shared prompted an apology email from the executive director to me and an invitation to help with the work to make the school a better place. However, I don't know if I have it in me to help. A few points that I shared, I have shared before this school year and nothing changed. Sharing all the negative situations that have happened to me this school year put me in a situation to retraumatize myself and relive it. Listening to other people share

was emotionally taxing even though I already knew some of their stories. I have not slept well since participating in the listening tour ... and this was only the listening tour.

I'm taking a risk today writing about how I currently feel knowing that could result in some negative ramifications; however, I need school leaders to know this process is traumatizing for Black staff members. We are being asked to share these experiences that most of us have choked down just so we can function at work. It's how we survive.

Bernice King, Dr. King's daughter, recently tweeted:

Even the statement, "Let's invite more Black people to the table," implies ownership of the table and control of who is invited.

Racism is about power.

Her words resonated with me. I am humbled by the fact that I have been invited to the table many times. Too often, I learn that I have no power. The table is nothing more than an opportunity to check a box to claim issues are being addressed. If I am going to potentially put myself through trauma, stress, and backlash — because we all know race and equity work comes with backlash — I want to at least have the power to make a change.

Beneath my calmness, a fire is raging. I want to believe I'll keep a lid on it and stay professional. The current climate of America is a pressure cooker, and writer James Baldwin said, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a rage almost all the time." Some people fear Black people, but angry Black people are the most feared. We should be angry; we deserve to be angry. Right now, my rage wants to knock the table over, light it on fire, enjoy watching it burn, and gather some Black people and build our own table. Where can Black people be safe? We can't be safe at home, in public, or at work. We are definitely not safe at someone else's table!

School leaders engaging in race and equity work need to know it will be hard. The ugliest parts of the organization will be brought to light. The school leader will either be guilty of participating in the harm or allowing it to thrive. The way the school operates will need to change. People will need to be fired or coached out. Curricula will need to be decolonized and reenvisioned. Students will need to be included. They have stories, too. If school leaders can't handle all of this or are not ready to do this, then race and equity work will not truly take

place. I am no longer interested in being at any table where I will be triggered for the sake of show or checking a box.

Right now, I don't know what I am going to do. I am conflicted. Black staff members are conflicted. If our Black lives really mattered at our schools, why are leaders only listening to us now? Why did it take George Floyd's death and worldwide protests for school leaders to now care about the oppression we have faced and our students have faced? We are being asked to trust that the situation will change. Historically speaking, we have records that show time and time again nothing changes, and the grips of white supremacy and the status quo reign supreme.