



LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

LISTEN TO THE TRUTHS OF YOUR AFRICAN AMERICAN COLLEAGUES

Many of my African American colleagues — and many of yours — have chosen to teach not solely for the joy of teaching but also out of a sense of responsibility to empower and educate students like the ones we were as children.

Most teachers pursue education as a career because of a desire to help children grow academically, socially, and emotionally. But some of us come to this work for additional reasons and look at it through particular lenses. Race is one of those lenses. We shouldn't deny that, but embrace it and learn from it. Before I sign off from my final Learning Leaders column, I want to shed some light on the perspective that I — and many African American educators — bring to this work.

Before I even thought about becoming a teacher, I was a student of African American history, and that shaped how I thought about my future as an educator. I knew I wanted to teach Black children. I understood the racism they were enduring because I was enduring it as a 28-year-old Black man and had endured it my whole life. I wanted to bring the spirit of all the freedom fighters I had studied over the years into my classroom and prepare my students not only to succeed in school and work, but also to navigate the challenges, obstacles, and pressures of racism and oppression we as Black people face. I wanted to teach them how to overcome and how to help others do the same.

I am not alone in this. Many of my African American colleagues — and many of yours — have chosen to teach not solely for the joy of teaching but also out of a sense of responsibility to empower and educate students like the ones we were as children. From the day I started this work, I have characterized it not as a job or profession, but as a personal duty. The classroom is my front in the battle against racism.

Although I do not attempt to speak for all African American educators, I believe that I speak for many of them when I say that teaching is more than a profession. I believe that many of them do this work for the same reason I do. And I know from experience that many of them see the classroom as an important place to ultimately defeat racism through the children.

These are serious times for African Americans, including children. But many people do not comprehend how serious and how much the political climate affects students in classrooms and schools. African American teachers do. They navigate it in and out of the classroom — in meetings, in conversations, and yes, in professional learning.

My ask of non-Black educators is this: When you see your African American colleagues, know that their world is different from yours, that the battles they navigate are different. They are descendants of the institution of enslavement and are therefore a product of a lineage of 400+ years of oppression. They also possess a depth of life experience and wisdom that are vital for our schools and our children.

So when your African American teacher colleague speaks, listen. When this teacher writes, read. When this teacher shares a perspective, instead of challenging it, learn from it and grow



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from it. Whether you are a peer or an administrator, appreciate the teacher for having the willingness and the courage to speak their truth to colleagues, rather than leaning into your discomfort to ostracize or isolate.

Professional learning is about growth and change so that all educators and students can improve and be their fullest selves. In that spirit, I challenge

each of you to learn as much as you can about and from your African American colleagues. That doesn't mean expecting them to speak on every race issue or take more responsibility for Black children than other educators. It means making space and really listening. Ask yourselves: Am I honoring the experience and wisdom of our African American educators? Am I giving

them a seat at the table and a voice in decision-making?

As an educator of Black students, a key ingredient to meeting my objectives with and for students has always been to teach my students to have a great sense of pride in who they are as individuals and collectively as African Americans. We need to do the same with our Black teachers. ■



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