



STOP DOING THE WORK

START BEING THE WORK

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Recently, a colleague asked me, *“How do you keep going? You’re putting yourself out there constantly, risking push back and anger – you’re a stronger person than me. Aren’t you tired of making people uncomfortable?”*

There is some truth within his question. Doing Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression work in education is often exhausting, offensive, hurtful, awkward, and – at times – shocking, and even scary. However, I am certainly not any stronger than my colleagues. In fact, as a Bi-racial Black woman working in a systemically racist system, I often face intimidating and stressful spaces where dominant biases and microaggressions have me in knots. So many folks have the misunderstanding that this work is easier for IBPOC administrators, that we have some special ability to discuss equity, inequities, and all things racism related. This is a detrimental myth. Racialized leaders are no more equipped for this work than their white colleagues. True: their lived experience can bring them some deeper understandings, some empathy for the struggle, and some regard from racialized communities. However, these are not a given as all racialized people are not a monolith. We are resilient, but we have had no choice in that; we have been forced into resiliency. Yet we, too, struggle with this work. In fact, because of our lived experience, the nuances, push back, resentment, and all of the micro/macro-aggressions that come with the work often cut quite deeply, and into so many complicated layers. Our race and/or culture does not magically repel criticism or accusations of discrimination. We are part of the system’s leadership; thus, by default, most see us as part of the problem, not recognizing our lived experience. Pause for a moment and think on that – what it must be like for our racialized colleagues who are asked to face the brunt of concerns and complaints from racialized students and families. It is time we stop assuming that the racialized leaders should do this work, and accept that all school leaders must **be** the work. Besides, there are so few Indigenous and Black administrators that it is beyond offensive to expect them to be responsible for this work; it is hurtful.

When school leaders are authentically *being* the work, then there is no opting out of using an equity and/or Anti-Racism lens. If they are just *doing* the work, then it becomes too easy for leaders to choose *not* to do the work any time it becomes too uncomfortable or unpopular, or when it contradicts their own needs. What I now see happening, too often, is folks doing the work when it works for them, when it is not too disruptive, when they think it will bring them respect and kudos, or when they have been called on the carpet because of an incident. When we are the work, there is no opting out of being equitable, and there is

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no picking or choosing when we will be Anti-Racist and when we won't. We must, for example, stop waiting for the next racist or discriminatory incident to occur in our schools and *then* do the work. Leaders need to show up, each and every day, *being* the work. It is the smaller moments, the daily decisions, the inclusive gestures, and supportive greetings that make the greatest EDI impact, shift the school culture, and begin the systemic change. This means we show up to graduation ceremony meetings, scholarship and awards meetings, class-loading

and composition meetings, PAC meetings, school-based team meetings, staff committee meetings, budget meetings, suspension meetings, and school-planning meetings, not asking, “*What are we doing to be more equitable?*” or, “*What are we doing to avoid accusations of discrimination and exclusion?*” but instead asking, “Are we *being* equitable... are we *being* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive? **How** are we *being* equitable? **How** are we *being* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive?” And school leaders need to share that ‘how’, so all school community members are aware of the work being done. The more they know, then the more that trusting and reciprocal relationships can develop. Leadership is not taken. People give leadership to those they trust and with whom they feel safe. School community members will allow those they trust to have influence over their studies, their practice, and their lives.

We can no longer hide behind the fear of getting it wrong. Too many leaders are more afraid of being called a racist than they are of racism in their school. When leaders start *being* the work, they become far less anxious about making mistakes, because they expect to make them and know what to say and how to be when they misstep. And because they *are* equitable and because they *are* Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive, most students, staff, parents, and community members will give them the space to grow and do better. We must start *being* the work instead of waiting for the elusive moment when we feel we can start expertly *doing* the work with success. There are no experts in this work, and we cannot expect it to be

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uncomplicated or stress-free. We often teach students to not fear failure and to not stress about making mistakes because we know that is where the growth and learning lie – within the flops and missteps. Why, then, when it comes to Anti-Racism, do we not adhere to that same wisdom? When leaders are *being* the work, they have the courage and the resolve to see past the norms, accepted traditions, and assumptions of the dominant culture. They are not afraid to be innovative and take risks. They begin to recognize the inequities within the system, within their school, and within their own leadership. For example, each year, many schools book a bag piper for their school leaving ceremony. Has the school considered a South Asian Drummer, an African Drummer, a Steel Pan Drummer, an Indigenous Drummer, or some other amazing cultural music that would reflect their school community? My mother is Scottish, and I love the bag pipes (an acquired taste), so I am not recommending that Principals rip the piper’s name from their list of contacts. I am suggesting, however, that such an addition is an easy way to be more inclusive, simply by being more culturally responsive to the school community. One who is *being* and leading through this work would not be able to move forward another year without questioning and unpacking leaving ceremony traditions.

Change is hard. Fighting to disrupt and reimagine our school system’s culture can be a fierce battle. Leaders who commit to this work need to be courageous (for-real courageous). It is time to flip the script on this,

and stop pretending that the school leaders who do this work are weak, pander to the 'woke', and/or are too sensitive to liberal leftist ideologies. The truth is that they are brave, and they bring humanity to their leadership. This work is not for the faint of heart – one has to have tough skin and a firm resolve. But I can promise, from much first-hand experience, that it does not have to be dreadful – not if leaders expect and embrace the disruption, and not if they have the courage to *be* the disruption. I commend the brave leaders who are *being* the work – especially the administrators who belong to marginalized groups – because their schools are not always safe spaces for them. It is especially challenging to make the school culture welcoming, and to ensure that staff, students, and families feel a sense of belonging, when they themselves do not always feel welcome and supported. This is another reason why we cannot rely on them to carry this work.

When we start truly *being* the work, we begin to see and experience the joy in this work. I love writer and activist Loretta J. Ross's comment that "Fighting racism should be fun! Being racist sucks." No doubt, it will be a bumpy journey. This work is new, so there is no manual, script, or playbook I can share that will explain in detail what to *do* because we need to *be* human. *Be* a decent human being who wants fair and equal access to educational opportunities for all children and families. Have high hopes for long trajectories of success for all students regardless of their race, gender, culture, sexuality, ability, mental health, or religion/spirituality, and the journey will

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have more positivity and the work more affirmation. It is so easy to say we are committed to equity and Anti-Racism/Anti-Oppression, to write it in our vision and mission statements, in our school and professional growth plans, but to truly and authentically *be* the work, we must actually believe we should and can do better. We must trust that things will improve. We need to believe we can *be* equitable – that we have it in ourselves to become Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive. If we keep trying to protect ourselves from getting it wrong, we will continue to hold ourselves back from real transformative change. We need to ease up on the controls, and stop judging the success of our leadership by weighing our failures against our achievements. Leading with equity, humanity, and compassion is greater than any success or failure. Such leaders do not ask staff and students to *do* equity; they ask them to *be* equitable. Leaders who help their school community become equitable and Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive leave a legacy of equity and justice when they retire or leave to lead elsewhere, and that legacy will be far more sustainable and enduring than a school full of well-intentioned folks performatively doing the work. Leaders need to ensure we are leaving a stable and lasting legacy of support, not harm. If the work stops, whether suddenly or gradually, it is a great loss to the community and the marginalized members suffer most.

Two years after the racial reckoning caused by George Floyd's murder, and in this era of truth and

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reconciliation, just *doing* the work is performative and can cause much harm. Advocates for equity and justice are now being more direct, and saying, “*Good intentions are not good enough anymore.*” Our culture of niceness and kindness needs to morph into a culture of courage and boldness. Leaders cannot avoid the fact that members of our school communities are experiencing pain, oppression, hurt, and harm. *Be* the work, face the discrimination and feel the injustice. As Dr. Gholdy Muhammad argues, “The very definition of equity is when one feels and acts on that feeling.” However, it is not enough to feel that discrimination is wrong. Equitable and Anti-Racist/Anti-Oppressive leaders need to act with their voices, their words, their pens, their hands, and their decisions. When I began to *be* the work, I started to

see past my blind spots, unpack my implicit biases, and recognize the many inequities in education and school cultures. I embraced the challenge to dismantle racism and other forms of oppression. As I continue to decenter and reimagine, I appreciate the joy in receiving support and encouragement, and walking alongside and supporting others as I strive to help them feel welcome, valued, and safe enough to have hope for a successful future as their authentic selves. We need to stop placing this work at the peak of anxiety. There is joy in this work. There is joy in great conversations, our hope for the future, creative initiatives, the pursuit of justice, inclusion, celebrations, and in the strength of holding space for each other. The poet Toi Derricotte wrote, “Joy is an act of resistance” — as we strive to *be* the work, we all need to lean into that joy.

### **Courageous Leaders who are *being* the work:**

#### **Know/Unpack Their Own Biases:**

<https://youtu.be/BFcjfqmVah8>

<https://youtu.be/egw-iheD1Mc>

<https://youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg>

[https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege\\_McIntosh-1989.pdf](https://psychology.umbc.edu/files/2016/10/White-Privilege_McIntosh-1989.pdf)

#### **Know Vulnerability is Strength:**

<https://youtu.be/AO6n9HmG0qM>

#### **Learn Cultural Humility:**

<https://youtu.be/H4iltVqkSKY>

<https://acei.org/innovation/cultivating-cultural-humility-in-education/>

#### **Understand Intersectionality:**

<https://youtu.be/JRCi2V8PxW4>

<https://youtu.be/WzbADY-CmTs>

#### **Learn Cultural and Historically Responsive Literacy:**

<https://youtu.be/cfDDnkOTIPI>

<https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-author-interview-with-dr-gholdy-muhammad-cultivating-genius/2020/01>

<https://youtu.be/UM3Lfk751cg>

#### **Get Used to the Discomfort – Normalize it:**

<https://youtu.be/woEh1blQFKs>

#### **Learn How to Call People In, Not Out:**

[https://youtu.be/xw\\_720iQDss](https://youtu.be/xw_720iQDss)

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html>

#### **Understand the Pain and Trauma of Discrimination:**

<https://youtu.be/aV4Hk4PQ4Tc>

#### **Critically plan for Incidents of Racism/Discrimination:**

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/navigating-responses-to-racism-in-your-school-community>