

**I'm Tired.**

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BY:



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## Living with the invisible tax of being a Black educator.

I've taught for five years, experiencing . . .

Three states, three schools, three subjects, three levels

Urban and suburban contexts

Homogenous and diverse student bodies and staffs

Laughing with colleagues

Crying with students

Mourning students and colleagues

Wanting to quit

Being more energized about teaching than I can put into words

I've formed strong, lasting relationships in each setting, but . . .

I'm tired.

I had prepared a whole story to tell. About the struggles of feeling like I'm not doing enough. A story about my personal failures that aren't really mine to own. About a system that over-extends teachers while undersupporting them. The story described how I'm asked to be everything to everyone. A teacher, counselor, social worker, and confidant all while lesson planning, grading, attending meetings, and conferencing with parents regularly. It was a good story . . . a true story . . . but ultimately the easy, incomplete story.

Don't get me wrong, the system is unjust and draining and unsustainable. But that's not why I'm tired today. Today, amidst a worldwide pandemic and international protests, I'm tired because as a Black educator, I'm always overcompensating and yet it's rarely enough to protect my kids. I'm exhausted by whiteness and a system that asks me to do more and care for hundreds of students while it fails to care for me.

Being a Black teacher: Is. Not. The. Same as being A *teacher*. It's NEVER the same. The job is different, harder, and more consuming than anyone, including white teachers, can ever understand.

When I build relationships with students, especially those who display challenging behaviors, the takeaway for my colleagues is "it's a blessing that they have someone." Somehow the system and my white colleagues miss the piece of me that leaves with each student. And I don't tell them about it either.

Every time a student reaches out for support and shares their trauma, there's an overarching gratefulness for how they were able to process in a safe space. No one considers the secondary trauma it burns into my spirit or the personal demons it could awaken. There isn't care for how their stories of oppression and abuse bring mine to the surface. Rarely is there mention of how their pain, anger, and desperation enhances my own, not by my white colleagues or my school's administration.

They don't see my teacher-hood when they

Declare it's a *calling* without mentioning the *suffering*,

Describe it as the ultimate civil *service* with no mention of the *burden*.

Tout it as an act of *love* separated from the immense *loss*.

I'm tired and invisible.

Most Black educators can share tens of stories about the Black tax (King, 2016) and all the ways we carry more. These stories desperately need to be sought out, heard, and shared. So, in that effort, here's one of mine.

Don't get me wrong, the system is unjust and draining and

unsustainable. But that's not why I'm tired today.

One afternoon at school, a student made a false report and a SWAT team was called into the building. The entire school was on lockdown for hours, and officers burst into classrooms with their guns up. Once they realized there was no real threat, police forced all students out of the building in single-file lines while yelling at anyone who disobeyed. No one was allowed to retrieve belongings and students were forced into a downpour of rain without jackets, house keys, backpacks, and for some wallets and public transportation cards.

I vividly remember students looking at me with fear and frustration in their eyes. They needed my support and protection. They needed my advocacy because they knew I loved them. They trusted me to navigate the situation for them. They wanted me to provide safety.

I wonder how many of them knew we were both looking for the same thing.

Take a second and position yourself as a Black educator watching your students process the:

Fear of staring at a gun in their face at school

Uncertainty in not knowing what's happening

Stress of leaving school hours late when they have to pick up a sibling

Cold freezing raindrops on their skin

Anxiety of not knowing how they'll get home or even inside their house.

Imagine yourself feeling it alongside them because you know them. Because parts of you are them.

Do you know the most disturbing part of that memory for me? The Black teachers who gave up our jackets, emptied all our cash for student bus/train fare, coordinated Uber and Lyft rides, and stayed well into the evening hours waiting for parents to pick up their children. We made the devastating yet routine decision to push aside our own trauma to make sure our Black students were cared for. Our trauma was secondary. Concealed. Something to be dealt with on our own time. Something to be sacrificed and ignored.

And that might've been a systemic failure . . . if only a single white teacher had showed up in the same capacity. I remember looking around in the chaos to see at least 10 Black staff and only two white teachers. The white teachers stayed for a moment and within an hour, they were gone. The Black staff stayed for hours. We saw the anguish and tension in each other's faces. We heard the disappointment and sadness in each other's voices as they apologized for leaving because they had to go care for their own loved ones. We felt the concern when we asked each other if we were okay and encouraged taking the night off instead of doing any work.

I'm not here to judge or qualify individual responses to traumatic events; I needed healing too. I needed to go home, eat, cry, hug someone, and let it out. But in that moment my students needed me and, like always, I neglected myself for them. It's a choice I repeatedly make because I'd rather deal with the mental and emotional toll on myself than risk another outcome.

I'm tired and invisible and angry.

My reality is that I have to show up and provide more than non-Black colleagues daily. And while that's problematic enough, I'm also pressured to negotiate language to placate white fragility and guilt. I couldn't process this with them. I couldn't ask them to analyze how race influenced the sequence of events. This creates an immense tension between maintaining safe spaces for a largely white teaching workforce while simultaneously pushing for change that cares for Black bodies, including my own.

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So, excuse me if I've had enough of individual-level solutions like work-life balance, self-care, and mindfulness. These solutions are as short-sighted as the people who see me as an effective educator without once considering how I've been disproportionately depleted in that effort. They are "solutions" that come with a

tremendous cost that only some of us bear.

I'm tired and invisible and angry and discouraged.

I don't know how long I can do it for or how long I'll even want to. I don't know what I'll look like on the other side of teaching (whether it's in three years or 30) or how much guilt I'll carry for all the times I couldn't be enough.

All I know is that I'll continue for as long as I can and deal with the impacts later . .

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I've had a lot of practice in that.

#### **CITATION:**

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