

I'm Tired.

Faven Habte

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 under-
supporting 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.

One afternoon at school, a student made a false report and a SWAT team was called into the building. The entire school was on lock down 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



Don't get me wrong, the system is unjust and draining and unsustainable. But that's not why I'm tired today.

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.

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



We made the devastating yet routine decision to push aside our own trauma to make sure our Black students were cared for.

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 . . . I've had a lot of practice in that.**

Suggested Resource

King, J. (2016, May 15). *The invisible tax on teachers of color*. Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-invisible-tax-on-black-teachers/2016/05/15/6b7bea06-16f7-11e6-aa55-670cabef46e0_story.html

Citation

Habte, F. (2021). I'm tired. *Kaleidoscope: Educator Voices and Perspectives*, 7(2), 3–5.



Faven Habte,

a Knowles Senior Fellow, teaches high school science in Washington, D.C. Throughout her career, she's taught chemistry, biology, and environmental science and loves finding connections between the content and social issues,

especially those centered around identity, race, and equity. Faven is passionate about teaching students of color, including English language learners, a group that is close to her heart as a first-generation Eritrean-American. In her spare time, Faven enjoys traveling, cooking, and reading. Reach Faven at faven.habte@knowlesteachers.org.