

“I Gotta Choose Me!”

Re-Imagining Self-Care Practices for Black Educators Pre-Burnout

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Abstract

Through systemic inequalities and limited resources, Black male and women educators are tasked with enriching the next generation's minds. In the educational landscape, especially in urban settings, the need for representation is a standard that is important for children and families. Black educators are pivotal, yet their presence is met at the intersection of being cultural ambassadors and educators while enduring unique pressures, all leading to burnout. In a field where Black male educator representation is few yet needed, the charge to be present can be overwhelming. Black women, who make up the majority of the education ecosystem, often fall prey to “other mothering” roles, thus supporting students beyond what is required. For several Black educators, the requirement, specifically for Black youth, involves being present and actively participating in a student's emotional, mental, and physical well-being. In contrast, non-Black educators are not inundated with the same unique challenges to foster an equitable educational environment.

But what if Black educators as a collective reimaged self-care? What if self-care wasn't something Black educators did post-burnout yet took an intentional stand and practiced daily? What if Black educators did not have to compromise their peace of mind or sacrifice the gift of time to prove their investment in students' lives and futures? Thereby, one shifts one's perspective of working from a deficit to one of advocacy and empowerment.

Keywords: *Black educators, self-care, Black mental health, burnout, urban education*

During the first month of 2024, Black women and the world of education were rocked yet again. The news of Dr. Antoinette “Bonnie” Candia-Bailey's passing by suicide rippled through the Black education community. Immediately, my thoughts began to race for many reasons: 1) as a godmother to a first-year student at the same institution where

Dr. Candia-Bailey served as Vice President of Student Affairs, and with civil unrest unfolding; 2) as an educator and Black woman, I can empathize with not being seen or heard in a space that you helped cultivate for students and staff; and 3) I wonder how many times Dr. Candia-Bailey shared her truth before she was heard. Despite Dr.

Candia-Bailey's passing being attributed to bullying after coming forward about her mental health issues, I could not help but sit and reflect on how Black educators arrive at a juncture where burnout, particularly in education, is costing us more than our peace, but our lives (Grazette, 2024)?

Every day, Black educators go beyond what is necessary for their students (Gist, 2022): imparting knowledge and serving as a (quasi) mentor or an extended family member to ensure the basic needs of their students are seen, heard, and valued (Sandles, 2018). While none of the above are highlighted in the teacher certification handbook, it is the on-the-job training you cannot prepare for, especially in urban education (Pabon, 2016). The intersectionality of Black educators can be taxing on an individual (Mahatmya et al., 2022). To be Black means your existence is often scrutinized, yet to be Black *and* working in the education field means your knowledge, expertise in content areas, and accomplishments are perceived to be questionable when compared to your white counterparts (Mahatmya et al., 2022). All the while, Black educators are expected to be prepared in all ways (i.e., mentally, physically, spiritually, etc.) to present their best selves to the students and families they serve daily.

Toni Jones (2019) posits the reimagining between one's weekday and weekend is necessary to create a distinction between a work versus worth ethic. Nonetheless, educators are often relegated to looking forward to the fall, winter, and summer breaks to rest and recharge. In "Rest is Resistance" Hersey (2022) recites that rest is an act of resistance as opposition to grind culture, which stems from the infrastructures of capitalism and white supremacy. Due to societal norms, exhaustion has become a badge of honor rather than an indicator that rest is the remedy. The only problem is adequate rest; rejuvenation rarely occurs because the days are few. Some educators

are coerced to work summer school sessions or participate in extra service pay opportunities to ensure no financial shortfall. Hersey further explains that cultural norms have manipulated the majority to believe that rest is a scam; hence, guilt and shame arise when rest is taken.

Educators who have transitioned from the classroom to an administrative role no longer have a scheduled break to look forward to due to their year-round commitment. Therefore, rest times must be scheduled between peak times of the school year, such as the back-to-school fair, summer retreat, professional development, or the end-of-year Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reporting. As responsibilities increase and days off are halted by "mandatory" tasks, the factors leading to burnout quickly add up rather than subtract.

Burnout in Education

While the feeling of burnout may be a norm when working towards a goal, the consistently heightened state of burnout should not be considered a daily norm (Carlotto & Câmara, 2019; Haberman, 2005). Maslach et al. (2001) posit that burnout is a syndrome which surfaces as a result of "chronic interpersonal stressors on the job" (p. 399). Stressors can come from a myriad of experiences and cause a build-up of emotions. However, Maslach et al. attribute these stressors to three primary components: "1) overwhelming exhaustion, 2) feelings of cynicism and detachment, and 3) a sense of ineffectiveness" (p. 399). For Black educators, feelings of intense stress may arise as other roles are taken on because of a lack of resources in urban districts. Examples of a lack of resources in urban districts include funding for books and supplies, infrastructure, curriculum enhancements, and programming (Pizarro & Kholi, 2020). Tax dollars primarily impact urban school districts' funding. Lueken and

Shuls (2019) posit that efficiency, equity, and educational opportunity principles should guide K-12 school funding. However, due to the misalignment of student outcomes and taxpayers' willingness to pay more taxes, school spending will continually be an issue in state funding systems. While property values are lower in and around urban school districts, the poverty level of families may be higher due to socioeconomic barriers (Welsh & Swain, 2020). As a result, parents are more likely to work multiple jobs to equal the pay of one job to make ends meet.

Teachers and other essential school staff roles—such as cultural and advocacy liaisons and community engagement specialists—extend beyond academics. These roles offer guidance and support to students while cultivating a positive school environment. Should one or both roles be downsized, the responsibilities will shift to another staff member, which can significantly impact an educator's experience in the school setting. Utilizing the job-demand resource model (JD-R), Bakker et al. (2004) demonstrate how employees are more likely to experience burnout when there is a lack of resources, and the demands are higher than anticipated. Carlotto and Câmara (2019) observed that “teachers remain as paid employees but stop functioning,” which equates to a lack of emotional commitment and a sense of efficacy (p.2).

Often, educators will fall into the rhythm of the school year, moving to and through difficult situations with staff, students, and families unaware of the impact of burnout and its contributing factors (Pizarro & Kohli, 2020). According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2023) 2020-21 report, women comprise 77% of all teachers; of the 77% reported, Black women educators consist of five percent. Though the number represented is small, the impact of Black women in the classroom or the education

space overall is significant. Most Black women, internal and external to education, find it easy to align with the Strong Black Woman schema (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2007; Watson & Hunter, 2016; Woods-Giscombe, 2010) because, communally, society praises Black women for enduring the hardships others ignore (Woods-Giscombe, 2010). As a repercussion of the COVID-19 pandemic, a collective shift in education is occurring (WeiBenfels et al., 2022). Several Black women educators are learning the value of centering themselves in their ecosystem and attending to their needs first. Black women putting their needs first includes honoring their bodies with periods of rest, extending grace, and exercising their right to say no without explanation.

With limited representation in education, Black male educators are two percent of the public school system (Pabon, 2016). Looked upon as father figures, disciplinarians, and role models, Black male educators are expected to play the role of Superman (Brown, 2011; Pabon, 2016; Williams, 2023). Unlike Black women educators who often embody the nurturing role, Black male educators are generally responsible for fostering structure within the school environment, particularly amongst male students (Acuff, 2018; Pabon, 2016; Sandles, 2018). Due to society's portrayal of Black men as dangerous criminals and the need for constant scrutiny (Kumah-Abiwu, 2020), Black male educators have a more difficult time integrating into roles outside that of disciplinarian within the public school environment. Black male educators are mostly seen through the lens of their gender and race first before that of coach, teacher, counselor, or confidant (Pabon, 2016; Woodson & Pabon, 2016), as opposed to their white male colleagues. Thus, Black men are the first line of response to challenges when Black boys are identified as problematic (Pabon, 2016).

Both Black men and women educators have a wealth of knowledge, expertise, and guidance to foster a healthy public school environment (Sandles, 2018). However, burnout is more likely to occur when Black educators are seen as the repository for all things Black (Sandles, 2018). The dismissal of Black men and women's educational insight, coupled with everyday challenges associated with Blackness such as micro/macroaggressions and stereotypes, impact Black educators significantly.

First developed as a medical concept, Geronimus (1996) introduced racial weathering or weathering to show how racial disparities affected the health of Black patients and led to premature death. Health concerns such as hypertension and high blood pressure were rated high among Black patients (Flack et al., 2010; Geronimus, 1992). In a later study, Geronimus et al. (2006) found evidence that "living in a race-conscious society that stigmatizes, and disadvantages Blacks may cause disproportionate physiological deterioration" (p. 826). In an educational setting, weathering may come because of the inherent expectation for Black educators to respond to challenges primarily concerning Black students, the constant feeling of being "on" to make their presence palatable for their non-Black colleagues or working tirelessly to prove their worthiness for a job promotion. To counteract racial battle fatigue (RBF), Black educators may experience instrumental educational practices that should be implemented daily.

Holistic Practices

Emerging in the 1980s, holistic education practices were the response to what Mahmoudi et al. (2012) called the "mechanistic" worldview of mainstream education. Moving from a traditional concept of focusing on parts of the individual, holistic education practices focus on the "whole" (emotional, physical, spiritual, mental) person,

emphasizing interconnectedness. In the Black community, the concept of interconnectedness is exemplified through representation. Research shows that Black students achieve higher academic outcomes under the guidance of Black educators and face fewer suspensions and exclusionary measures (Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Lisle-Johnson & Kholi, 2020). For young Black girls and boys, Black male and female educators embody the potential to defy societal expectations (Goings & Bianco, 2016). These educators serve as crucial role models, demonstrating the possibilities and aspirations within reach for Black youth.

Amidst the challenges of teaching in an urban district during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found holistic practices indispensable in fostering a supportive and engaging classroom environment. Grounding techniques and affirmations, which I used to center myself, seamlessly translated into my classroom routine. Recognizing the shared uncertainty the students and I faced; I focused on fostering a positive community of energy and engagement rather than enforcing strict rules. Gray et al. (2022) examined the impact of community on Black students in education. They observed that educational settings that foster a community for students to engage and learn from others invoke a student's motivation and sense of empowerment, thus underpinning the Bantu concept of Ubuntu or "we-ness," *I am because of we all are. Since we are, therefore, I am.* Four key expectations centered on self-respect and mutual respect guided our interactions, beginning each day with a morning circle where we shared affirmations inspired by readings, music, or student interests. This approach cultivated a sense of community and ownership among students, empowering them to actively participate in discussions and take charge of their learning journey. By establishing this foundation, I aimed to define boundaries and create a supportive space where every student felt valued and motivated to excel.

In a recent study, Matthews et al. (2021) developed an observation protocol for Belonging-Centered Instruction (BCI), “teachers’ provision of opportunities for active inclusion, achievement, identification, and empowerment via interpersonal interactions and instructional techniques” (p. 5). Matthews et al. argue that when teachers provide emotional support, foster social connections, and demonstrate warmth and care towards students, students’ sense of belonging in the classroom becomes more significant, reducing feelings of “alienation, exclusion, and dehumanization among students of color” (p. 5). Consistent messages like “My time vs. your time” reinforced our commitment to staying focused on learning goals, encouraging students to process their thoughts, ask questions, and embrace their role as active participants in their education.

Black Educators Incorporating Holistic Practices

For Black educators in urban school environments, holistic education practices can serve as a powerful connection to their heritage (Durden, 2007; Morton et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2023). The constant uphill battle of being overworked, underpaid, and lacking adequate resources in urban school environments can create an atmosphere of anxiety. Establishing a foundation of holistic practices will aid in shifting Black educators from a survival trauma response to achieving self-actualization. Some general themes of holistic practices Black educators can incorporate daily are:

- 1) ***Balancing responsibilities to students and the community while prioritizing personal well-being.*** For most educators, the mantra “students first” guides their code of ethics. While it is vital to fill the cups of their students, Black educators, particularly those working with underserved student populations, should also prioritize filling

their cups. To do so, Black educators should make the most of their paid time off. Practicing active rest and engaging in activities that bring joy and relaxation outside of professional responsibilities helps to rejuvenate the educator, thus allowing them to support students and contribute positively to the community upon their return (Muhammad, 2022; Vlach et al., 2023).

Additionally, Black educators should practice setting healthy boundaries that promote work-life balance. All devices (i.e., laptop, tablet, cell phone, etc.) used for work correspondence should be kept separate from personal devices. Consequently, this separation will reduce the “pulling” of responding to notifications during personal time. The work will get done, yet having a gold star mentality of being the first and best work against Black educators’ interests.

- 2) ***Embracing vulnerability and letting go of the “superhero” mentality.*** The core motivation for Black educators lies in the inner child, shaping the reason they were drawn to the profession. Be that as it may, Black educators must understand that they cannot *save all their students regardless of time and effort*. Representation of Black educators in schools is crucial, primarily for students of color. However, cultivating a diverse and inclusive learning environment is everyone’s responsibility. So, Black educators operating within the guidelines of their position and resisting the inclination to say “yes” aids in preserving and honoring their well-being. To counteract committing to responsibilities outside of their roles, Black educators should practice assessing their workload first and then prioritize tasks that align with their role and

the potential to contribute to their professional growth.

- 3) ***Harnessing the power of mindset shifts to reshape daily routines.*** Collectively, Black individuals bring their lived experiences into social and professional settings (Morton et al., 2022; Muhammad, 2023). When engaged in urban education, Black educators frequently encounter a landscape filled with challenges such as a lack of resources and support, low wages, and implicit bias. Despite the challenges, Black educators should practice centering joy holistically. Joy is an act of resistance (Love, 2019; Vlach et al., 2023), and choosing joy is a daily decision Black educators can make. Muhammad (2023) explains educators only get to “learning and experiencing joy when we have an intentional and authentic purpose to dismantle oppression” (p. 18). As stated previously, Black students learn better when taught by Black educators. Therefore, as Black educators begin to heal and center his or herself as the sun in their ecosystem, the students will benefit and emulate themselves. Vlach et al. (2023) underscore that embracing joy is integral to personal healing and pivotal in guiding Black educators toward a future free from the societal injustices of the past (p. 122), illustrating how a mindset focused on achieving joy can transform their journey.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was to show educators that 1) you can serve your students and community and do your job effectively without sacrificing yourself; 2) you are not less than others because you decided to “take the cape off;” and 3) how a mindset shift can alter how you show up in your

daily routine ultimately impacting your interactions with others. As a result, Black educators will free themselves from the confines and the guilt of “... *but it is for the students*” and begin to acknowledge, assess, and address their needs in the moment. Furthermore, should Black educators find it necessary to leave the field of education to preserve what is left of their arsenal, seek out joy, and have a resurgence of happiness, that is okay.

Living in a society where Blackness is under a microscope the majority, if not all, of the time, Black educators must evolve to a space where saying no is enough and leaving no longer poses a threat but an admission of worthiness. Despite what representation looks like in the classroom or at the administration level, burnout is not worth sacrificing quality of life. Resilience is synonymous with the genetic makeup of Black people (Jacob et al., 2023). Should the day come when Black educators must choose between themselves or their students, they should take note of Chloe and Halle’s (2018) debut album and know *The Kids [Will Be] Alright*.

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