

STEP INTO THE POWER YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN

Audrey Wilson

Earlier this year I considered leaving the teaching profession and pursuing a career that allowed me to support young people in a different way. It wasn't that I felt overwhelmed by the work of teaching my students, but rather I was overwhelmed by the education system itself. I wanted to work within a system that protected children, but, I found that too often our educational institutions cause more unintended harm than good for our youth. Also, I found that efforts to repair these systemic failures are frequently met with resistance or outright refusal to change. When educators try to advocate for the children who we serve too often our hands are slapped, doors are closed, and we are ostracized for trying to dismantle a system that causes harm.

During my sixteen years working in secondary education, I longed for a space where I could openly address inequities. Yet, in the moments I had the opportunity to speak about the injustices I experienced, I was repeatedly told that my tone was too harsh, that I needed to be positive, to smile more, and to appreciate the good over the bad. When we work in an environment that promotes the toxic narrative that teachers should give all they have without acknowledging the very real problems before us, it becomes difficult to listen to the internal voice that tells us to speak out and stand up for change. Too often standing up for our students requires standing against the status quo. It requires putting ourselves on the line too. It is spiritually draining.

This work becomes even more exhausting when the deep systemic problems that harm our students are incredibly personal. We talk about the need to recruit and maintain our Black, Indigenous, Teachers of Color but we do little to ensure that those teachers thrive. I felt isolated being one of few teachers of color in the teaching profession because the inequities and racism in the education system doesn't only affect our students, it affects me too. It affects us all.

The blatant racism our nation witnessed when George Floyd was murdered in late spring of 2020 caused a revitalized surge of interest in anti-racism across the country. The education community professed a desire to learn more about institutional racism and how to address oppressive practices within schools. In practice, however, the educational community continues to do too little to fight racism in our schools. Teachers who marched and joined book clubs to learn about their own biases remained reluctant to channel what they learned into their remote learning classes in the fall.

This disconnect between what we know and profess to believe as educators, and the actions we actually take is so blatant that it becomes draining to those of us who are trying to make the important and necessary changes we know are right for our students. I experienced this disconnect both as an MAT candidate at Puget Sound and as a classroom teacher. It's as if we went through spring training and practice and nobody showed up for the game.

And yet, there were people pushing forward. After years of struggling to find a space where my voice mattered and was not silenced, the University of Puget Sound pushed ahead and

invited me to share in a panel about what culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching looked like in the classroom. Following the panel discussion, Professor Dexter Gordon offered me this simple mantra: Step into the power you have been given.

A few months after Professor Dexter Gordon shared these words, I was invited to teach a summer course at the University of Puget Sound for MAT candidates. The class centered culturally responsive teaching and anti-racist practices that candidates experienced during their student teaching. The summer course provided a brave space for MAT candidates to wrestle with the tension between knowing what is right and acting on it. Students pushed themselves to hold the mirror to their actions and beliefs and consider how their positionality and behaviors may have caused harm, or healing, in their classrooms and within their school communities.

Through this process of guiding MAT candidates, I found myself in a place of healing. The opportunity to teach offered me a space to engage with candidates in a place of curiosity rather than judgement. In this space, my heart had space to begin to heal. It gave me the opportunity to meet people where they are in their journey—to listen with the intention of better understanding. It helped me to center the end goal—providing opportunities for our students to learn and thrive within the learning communities we create. For years when I had vocalized concerns around racial equity in education, I was nearly always silenced by individuals in power. Doors were closed, opportunities ceased to exist for me. The University offered me an opportunity to do the work I always wanted to, and it offered me the opportunity to heal.

As a former student in the MAT program I learned valuable skills and ideas that inspired me as a teacher and have informed my practice in ways that are invaluable. However, like so many of our nations' academic institutions, there were aspects of the program that were imperfect and did not always offer a space where I was consistently seen as a teacher of color. What is different about the University of Puget Sound is that, through the guidance of individuals like Professor Dexter Gordon, there has been a consistent effort made toward growth and repair. These are the types of shifts that begin to stop the disconnect between good intentions and actionable change.

The words Step Into Your Power remain written on the whiteboard in my office. Professor Dexter Gordon's words of encouragement have carried me through the summer course and into a new role in a school building where I feel I can finally thrive. His words remind me that I do have the power to support other educators in their journey to become culturally responsive and anti-racist teachers. They remind me that I have the power to change the system for the better.

Audrey Wilson, MAT 2013, is currently a Dean of Students and Behavior Specialist at Oakland High School in Tacoma, Washington. She has worked as a Social Studies, English and Leadership secondary teacher in Tacoma, Federal Way and DC Public Schools. She is an Equity Team Leader and AVID facilitator for Tacoma Public Schools.