



## Are Black Educators Heard & Supported at Your School?

By [Educator Barnes](#) – April 8, 2021

“Oh Lord, please don’t let me be misunderstood” were the words Simon sang during “Zoey’s Extraordinary Playlist,” right before he led a press conference as spokesperson of SPRQ Point. There had been an issue with the chirp (a SPRQ Point watch) where the facial recognition software was not recognizing Black and brown faces. Simon had one job. Give a press

conference and downplay the situation. He started by reading from his scripted words, but then he put the words away and said:

*What has not been fixed is the environment that led to this embarrassing oversight. See the chirp couldn't see Black and brown faces because there are no Black and brown people in positions of power at the company. Our leadership is comprised overwhelmingly of white men and on a board of ten directors, there are only two women and zero people of color. And if we don't start talking about this now, nothing is ever going to change.*

Simon, a Black man, isn't alone. There are many Black professionals who want to directly tell their jobs why there are problems and how race plays a role. However, it seems easier to stick to the script and downplay these situations. The problem is that for some Black people enough is enough and they will speak out, regardless of the consequences. In the education profession, there are Black educators who want to be heard. Unfortunately, schools are fumbling to address issues of race, diversity, and inclusion just like SPRQ Point did in the following episode which started exactly where the last episode ended with Simon at the podium during the press conference.

The next episode, "Zoey's Extraordinary Reckoning," aired during Black History Month. For people who do not know, the main character, Zoey, can hear and see other characters break into song and dance. These performance numbers highlight the feelings bottled up in the characters who are participating in singing the songs. The first song of this episode was "I'm a Black Man in a White World" and was sung by Simon. In addition, all of the songs in this episode were from Black artists.

Zoey saw Simon singing the song when she decided to facilitate an optional talk with the employees to discuss race. Zoey, who had no training in diversity, equity, and inclusion work, thought (for some reason) that she had the qualifications to facilitate the meeting which got completely derailed. How many times, in schools, do issues get brought to the surface and an unqualified person steps in to lead the work? It only makes the situation worse and can cause more harm. Last year, I shared how race and equity meetings can be traumatizing to people of color. Like some Black employees in schools during these race talks, the Black SPRQ Point employees were present but didn't participate. Simon only spoke when Zoey called on him directly to add to the conversation. He responded, "I'd rather not" and walked out of the optional meeting.

This episode was so impactful because Black people: Anya Adams (director), Zora Bikangaga (writer), and Luther Brown (choreographer) took the lead in shaping this episode and telling

the story from a Black lens. They did not allow Zoey to be a white savior. They pulled back the curtains and forced her character to grapple with her actions and role in the issues at the company. The CEO of SPRQ Point instructed Zoey to tell Simon to make a new statement saying those were just his opinions. She did...and she even offered to help him write a new statement. His response to her resonated deeply with me.

*You cannot rewrite an experience you know nothing about...I never had any mentor look out for me like Joan. There's no room for messing up for me and I have to constantly prove why I deserve to be here. Nice office...how did you swing that? They don't ever ask that to any of the other marketing execs...I have to constantly amputate parts of who I am to make other people comfortable in my presence, so they feel safe.*

All Black educators want is to be able to show up to work and be their full Black selves. They do not want to keep their heads down. They just want to be themselves and not be a version of themselves that is palatable to everyone else. They want to have the same grace as everyone else.

Minda Harts, author of "The Memo: What Women of Color Need to Know to Secure a Seat at the Table" and "Right Within: How to Heal from Racial Trauma in the Workplace" said last month, "In the workplace often white men and women get to have a 'bad' day. They can holler, they can get upset and so much empathy is shown to them. But don't let a Black woman have a bad day.. Now you're scared of us, we are unapproachable and angry. The double standards are racists."

I have been asked how I got my admin job. I have been told by a principal, who wanted to hire me, that it was weird that I was licensed in so many areas. (Yes, he offered a job, and yes, I turned it down). I have been told not to cross my arms in staff meetings because it makes me look aggressive. I have had a colleague show me a picture of his Black relative on Zoom to show me he was "down with the cause."

As long as you keep your head down, and don't say anything, you can get by. Black educators are so tired of that. It should not be that way. That's why moments like Simon's speech happen. When Black educators get pressed down and overlooked time and time again, all those instances are like tiny little cuts. Over time, these incidents pile up. If rubbing alcohol was thrown onto a body full of open wounds, that body would yell out in pain. That body would want to be healed. That body would want to know that this is an environment where harm wouldn't come again. Whether Black educators' outcry or requests for help or solutions

is planned or unplanned, there are always consequences. (You'll have to watch the episode to learn if Simon recanted his statement.)

If a school is really a safe place for Black teachers, they should be able to speak up when there are concerns without fear of retaliation or fear of being labeled as an angry Black person. The administration should take care, time, and effort to address the issues head-on, not just throw a quick solution at it like Danny Michael Davis, SPRQ Point's CEO did, when he purchased a private jet for an African Children's Choir instead of addressing the issues of the facial recognition technology.

So, how do these band-aids and problem-solving avoiding tactics show up in schools? *"For Black History Month, you can dress in cultural garb."* Like all Black teachers have dashikis in their closets. *"You can lead or be part of the diversity, equity, and inclusion work."* As if we want to have to fix problems we did not cause. Furthermore, as if we want to interact with the people who are part of the problem. Yes, the extra woke white folks on those committees cause some of the most harm...let's save that deep dive for another piece. *"We are going to have a soul food pitch in."* As if some of us aren't vegan and have abandoned seasoning everything with salt pork or jowl bacon. Simply, the people in charge won't try to get to know the actual Black educators in their school, meet their needs, and address their issues. Instead, they try to find a solution without doing any real work and making any sustainable change.

That's not what Black educators want. They want admin to get a backbone and address the issues. Black educators want their curriculum decisions supported especially when they have the data to back up their decisions. They want to move out of only having the low classes since that where's the discipline issues are. They want to teach high ability and honor classes too...and they want the teachers across the hall to learn how to manage their classroom rooms as they did.

When Black educators move up the ladder, they don't want to get stuck in dean roles, culture and climate specialist roles, or any other roles that are created that don't allow them to show off their instructional knowledge. They want admin to fire the mediocre white teachers who seem to keep a job year in and year out. If admin doesn't want to fire them, cool. At least help them get better. Mediocre teachers should not be in any building comfortable with not improving. Last, listen to Black educators when they give feedback about how schools can better serve Black students. Some of them entered the profession so children who look like them have a better educational experience than they had. It hurts them to see the cycle of failure repeat itself.

I am not alone in having a voice on this topic. On Saturday, April 11, 2021, my Indy K-12 colleagues and I will be part of the Teach Indy Educators Conference and participating on the panel "Are You Listening? Perspectives from Black Educators." You don't need to be local to participate and participation is free. If you do decide to come to listen to our perspective, I need you to go one step further. I need you to go back to your building and take action.



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