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DISRUPTIVE WOMEN

A *WomenEd* Guide to Equitable Action in Education

CORWIN

8

TAKE YOUR SEAT AT THE TABLE!

Haley Yearwood

KEY POINTS

This chapter will ask:

- There is a lack of women from the global majority in school leadership, so how do you demonstrate that your seat at the table is not just a token gesture?
- As someone who does not fit the stereotypical leadership mould, how do you make your role distinctively your own and still feel comfortable?
- What can be done to support young global majority women at the start of their teaching career, enthusiastic and eager to make a difference?

Introduction

Being a senior leader can, at times, be a lonely endeavour. You are no longer part of the wider teaching body, but instead are part of a smaller, specialist group of colleagues. There are decisions that need a laser-sharp approach and these decisions are sometimes required to be made with little time for digestion or rumination. As a woman of colour, from humble beginnings, feeling like you 'belong' at the top can be difficult. The colleagues who you previously had an affinity with, due to culture or ethnicity, seem more distant. You have now stepped over the invisible line into whole-school leadership and the camaraderie seems less appropriate.

I distinctly remember a moment which epitomised my 'difference' a few years ago. I was a head of year at an outstanding school in inner-city London, and during one evening at the local pub (the usual end-of-term gathering) my colleagues started to share their GCSE results. I do not know how this conversation started, but there were about eight of us around the table and I was probably one of the few teachers there who had

been educated in London and at a state school. As a teenager, my own comprehensive secondary school had a very poor reputation; there were regular fights, our GCSE results were amongst the lowest in the borough, and by the time I was in Year 11, a police van was resident at our gates every day at 3:30pm. Saying that, I enjoyed school and my results – six C-grades and three A-grades – were some of the best amongst my immediate peers. These grades had allowed me to study English literature and drama at A-level and then again at university. Low and behold, fast-forward 20 years and I was now on the leadership team, managing a year group. I felt I had achieved well and I had been the first member of my immigrant family to attend university. So you can imagine my trepidation as one by one my colleagues reeled off their GCSE results – there was a multitude of As and A*s. I was embarrassed. No one had mentioned anything lower than a B and I dreaded what they would think of me, on top of what I *already* perceived they thought of me.

Teaching at a school which has an ethnically diverse demographic is lovely and I saw parallels between my own childhood and those of my students. However, my fellow teachers were not from the same socio-economic backgrounds, and I was highly self-aware and paranoid, feeling that I was not as worthy of my role as they were. Their knowledge and wit seemed extensive and they exuded confidence. My undergraduate and Master's degrees seemed insignificant. I (perhaps) observed the raised eyebrows and the (mis)interpretations of students' behaviours. You see, what I saw as banter and jovial interactions between students were criticised and policed. Ethnic minority households are generally loud, whether it is the conversation of the household, or the music being played, or the visitors who 'pop in', and this translates to the playground when our children are communicating. When you understand the colloquialisms of the Black children and can code-switch in a way that other senior leaders cannot, you become conscious about how you, yourself and your community are perceived. Being from the global majority, students of a similar background enjoy and have an affinity with aspects of your identity that, in turn, you feel you need to downplay so that you are not too 'down with the kids'.

My seat at the table was well-deserved though. No one had just *let* me be a head of year for the sake of it. I had interviewed and made an impression and my year group was successful.

It is very important that you are kind to yourself. I relayed this GCSE incident to a friend, who wonderfully remarked that it was not a case of me having to feel privileged to be at a table full of other people who absolutely deserved to be there, but more of a case that I should be proud that I was holding my own amongst peers who, on paper, should be running the country. Comparison is a killer. You can worry that someone else has an advantage over you because of the university they went to, or the social class they come from, but ultimately your achievements are not diminished by anyone else's accomplishments. You are a trailblazer – because of your professional qualifications, experiences, and integrity. You have earned your seat, just as everyone else has. Often, the only one who needs your credibility proven is you. We can become so fixated on

difference, so terrified of being 'othered', that we are blind to the common ground that we share with our colleagues which is one of success.

Being 'different' does not have to be a negative. With the realisation that you have earned your seat at the table should come the second realisation that your seat can be decorated however you please. A great method of taking stock and reflecting is simply by creating a 'Now, Next, Later' audit.

- What are you doing now professionally? What is happening in your educational setting that you are leading or implementing?
- What is next on the horizon? Short-term goals that are good to work towards and new ideas that are quick wins.
- What are you working towards in the long term? How will everything that you are doing come to fruition?

Barriers

Women's voices, particularly of those from diverse backgrounds, are needed more than ever to disrupt the status quo. According to the *Tes* magazine (Mason, 2022), female teachers are 'significantly less likely' to become Headteachers than their male counterparts, despite making up more of the workforce, with Department for Education data showing that 'men become headteachers earlier in their careers than women'. Global majority teachers (of any level) are much less likely to be led by a Headteacher or senior leaders who represent them culturally, or even by gender, as demonstrated in the chapter in this section by Parm Plummer.

When I was in Year 6, on the last day of school my Black female classroom teacher held a handful of us back at the end. She wished us the best of luck for Year 7 and our new adventure and ended her farewell with the words, '… you will have to work twice as hard to get half as far'. Her sentiment was lost on me and my 11-year-old naivety. It was only years later when I reflected on the women who had influenced me that I noted the caution in her last teaching moment with us. Her words also highlight the power of community, which is a tried and tested method for success for diverse women.

We must feel that we belong and are accepted, not simply tolerated. There is safety in numbers and those at the forefront of innovation and change in education must ensure that there is a profound support network for women: for Black, brown and Asian women; for women from challenging socio-economic backgrounds; for women at all levels of leadership. It is more than time to disrupt the status quo for these women.

Disruptions

- Imagine being a newly qualified teacher, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, who is handed a directory of support networks and interest groups. A myriad of opportunities would open for those young women who no doubt throughout

their career will question the validity of their seat at the table. These networks should be encouraged to promote both professional and personal innovation. We can explore a checklist of 'interests' when we sign up to a lifestyle app or website; we are able to curate our social media platforms; we can even choose what we digest on streaming apps – why not have the same as professionals in a challenging industry?

- These networks can be mandated by governments, for instance in the UK, starting on a borough level, with the model widened to national regions and even internationally. In a time of online meetings, webinars and podcasts, female teachers from the global majority would benefit from knowing where to reach for support from the outset of their career.
- It is important that, whilst networking is encouraged on a macro level, within schools themselves, new staff members should be made aware of any mentoring schemes which go beyond the usual Early Career Teacher (ECT) programmes. Where there may not be any, staff should be sign-posted to support groups.

I am now a Safeguarding Lead, in a different school, managing Mental Health and Well-being, as well as our PSHE curriculum and our Looked After cohort of students. At the start of my career, I would have loved to have met monthly with other Black and global majority teachers, to share and reflect with. In fact, I would absolutely love to have that now, 15 years in.

It can be lonely, but I know I am making a difference and whilst I definitely still have moments where I overthink an interaction or question how I may be perceived, I take stock and count my successes. You should too. Consider all that you have already achieved and all that you plan to do.

Pull your chair out and take your seat. You've got this.

Reference

Mason, C. (2022) 'Female teachers "significantly less likely" to become heads', *Tes*, 28 April [Online]. Available at www.tes.com/magazine/news/general/female-teachers-significantly-less-likely-become-heads (accessed 8 January 2023).