Why Comfortable is a Four-Letter Word

by Roy Blankeney, Assistant Principal, Dreher High School, Richland County School District One

"Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble." John Lewis (2020)

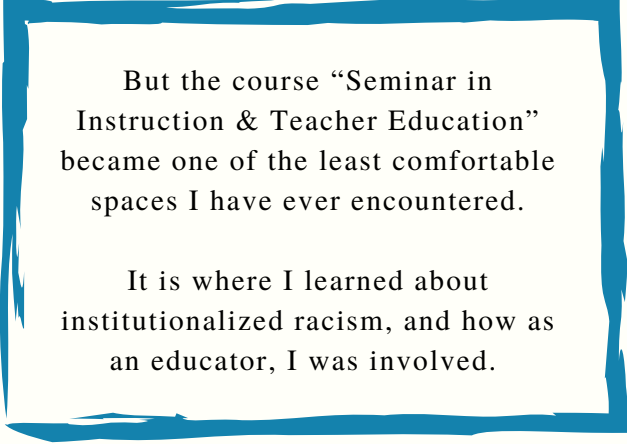I had no idea that attending a conference in 2019 would cause so much "good" trouble.

As a fairly shy person in crowds, I felt a new freedom being around so many people wearing the same nametag. This shared comradery made it easy to speak with complete strangers and provided a sense of security. So, while speaking with a group of attendees I mentioned I was with The University of South Carolina's (UofSC) *Professional Development Schools Network*. The group told me one of their friends had accepted a position with the UofSC, and I felt comfortable inviting this stranger to have coffee with me when she moved to Columbia. Rarely do people take messages back to others from casual encounters, and rarely do complete strangers take you up on an offer to have coffee.

This one did, and my days of being fairly comfortable with my world came to an end. This was the beginning of my "good" trouble.

Meeting this complete stranger and forming an instant friendship with her led to a discussion about my abandoned doctoral work. She inspired me to go back to work on my doctoral degree and offered to become my dissertation chair. Working with my new doctoral chair required a different academic focus and structure to my daily life. It meant returning to class and moving away from my comfortable beliefs. As an adult learner, I generally find the classroom to be a comfortable environment where it is easy to form new relationships. We may come from different places and life experiences, but in class, we come together to learn and focus on a shared subject.

But the course "Seminar in Instruction & Teacher Education" became one of the least comfortable spaces I have ever encountered.

It is where I learned about institutionalized racism, and how as an educator, I was involved.

> But the course "Seminar in Instruction & Teacher Education" became one of the least comfortable spaces I have ever encountered.
>
> It is where I learned about institutionalized racism, and how as an educator, I was involved.

This class resulted in zero comfort and was one of the wildest emotional rides ever. The class demographics included a white female professor, two of my black female colleagues from our school district, one black male, and another white female who had a black husband and son who joined our discussions. There were also two white males — me and a much younger man. These nine people took away my comfort, and I love them for doing it.

Throughout the course we focused on understanding why students of color do not succeed at the same rates as white students and how white supremacy and colonialist perspectives are overrepresented in schools. It became apparent that most of my classmates believed that I was a product of white privilege and not hard work.

I was hurt and confused.

I went home after the first three hours and told my wife that I had made a serious mistake and felt attacked. I discussed dropping the course and telling my new dissertation chair that I had reconsidered. I was unable to comprehend that I could be part of something so insidious.

To make things worse, my church was entering a time of reflection of racist practices called "Gracism," and I had been invited by our new African American minister to be a part of the initial

conversation. If I declined this opportunity, I would be turning my back on more than one person who believed that I may have something different to offer.

Still, I could not wrap my head around the thought that I could be considered racist.

But a memory of my father changed my mind. He used the word "privileged" to describe white people 40 years ago. He tried to explain the idea to me then, but I was a new teacher with a new wife and had other things to worry about. I needed to continue my privileged and very comfortable life. I was not unlike other white folks cited in an article from the *Pew Research Center* indicating that only 53% of white people think that the United States still has work to do to make equity real in our country, and 38% feel as if no more changes are needed.

My father was wise enough to know that he needed to listen to and consider others' opinions and ideas. He welcomed being challenged and often used his wide understanding of different topics to challenge my brother and me during supper. The "discussions" were often spirited, flustered my mother, made small children cry, and ran off more than one of my brother's girlfriends. We continued until we had exhausted the topic, had dessert, and retired to the den to enjoy the rest of the evening. Now, years have gone by, and my father is no longer here to bring further enlightenment. But the memory caused me to see what an opportunity I would be throwing away if I walked away.

I remembered what *un*comfortable felt like and knew I could do it again.

I persevered through the doctoral program and engaged in deep work through the church. I believe that my understanding has grown enough to make me a beginning "anti-racist." I can hear the word "racist" without becoming angry, even if it is being used to describe me. Instead of walking away from a conversation, I seek to understand and then ask for help in learning how to change or explain myself when misunderstood.

Our staff is engaged in ongoing work to become *trauma-informed*. We are also taking the energy and

> This is why I believe comfortable can be a four-letter word. When we are comfortable, we tend to leave things alone. We can say, "That's not my problem," or "America gives everyone the same opportunity."
>
> Words that allow us to remain aloof, disconnected, and uninvolved.

empathy developed in that process to focus on dismantling institutionalized racism in our school. I hope that by understanding the trauma that racism causes, our staff will find new energy for the work and the reflection necessary to have this difficult conversation.

This is why I believe comfortable can be a four-letter word. When we are comfortable, we tend to leave things alone. We can say, "That's not my problem," or "America gives everyone the same opportunity."

Words that allow us to remain aloof, disconnected, and uninvolved.

Comfort can lead to being complacent.

I plan to make a few folks *un*comfortable with the hope that we can provide an environment where their resilience will sustain their interest and cause them to seek to understand how they can take action to diminish the effects of racism in our schools. Are you comfortable? We should not be while any type of racism exists.

We are teachers. We are used to being *un*comfortable. Look for ways you can personally change your approach to be more culturally relevant, inclusive, and actively anti-racist. Start a hard conversation in a safe space, be open to new ideas about institutionalized racism, take your new understanding, and make a difference.

Get into some good trouble.

Roy Blakeney is an Assistant Principal at Dreher High School in Richland County School District One in Columbia, South Carolina. He is responsible for recruiting and developing teachers, mentoring new faculty, maintaining teacher certification, and evaluation of faculty. He has served as the Professional Development School administrator in the University of South Carolina's partnership since 2002.