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SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA, USA
JUNE 2020

Dear Ruhaniat Community,

I come to you as a cis-gendered, white female. I also come to you as an educator (specifically of elementary-aged students).

I realize that those distinctions come with a massive amount of privilege in this world. I have the privilege of the ease of access to education, the privilege of presenting as a white femme, and subsequently the privilege of self-identifying with that presentation. This is by no means an exhaustive list. As an educator, a woman, a white person, a human on this earth, let me state clearly: Black Lives Matter.

From an educators' perspective, as someone who is a cog in the educational system, it has become blatantly clear that the system is not designed for all students to succeed. Simply put: our public-school system is failing our BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) students.

Let me take you through what I mean using the school-to-prison pipeline model (*I know*, that's a hard pill to swallow. It was for me too, as I started my journey. But stick with me here so you know what I mean):

The pipeline starts with inadequate resources in public schools. Our society continuously defunds education. This is not new. Historically, this has been happening continuously and budget projections for the foreseeable future show cuts every single year (and will continue due to the recession from Covid-19). These further cuts will be detrimental to the schools and the students. In addition, as the protests for the murders of Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Breonna Taylor (and countless other Black lives) continue on, cities across the United States (and what I can only imagine is the world) are *increasing* their police budgets. Cities are continuously investing in the police force while divesting funds away from healthcare (physical and mental), education and housing. These social services cuts disproportionately affect BIPOC communities, and citizens with special needs (including those needing mental health treatment). But, let me get back to education.

As funding gets cut, resources like nurses, health aides, librarians, education therapists, counselors, speech pathologists, reading coaches, ELD (English Language Development) teachers, social workers, arts teachers (like me), after-school programs, extra-curricular activities, school lunches, will be sacrificed. Let me state this another way: the resources that are paramount in helping the most struggling students, will be taken away from them. As we

divest from the resources within our schools, the burden will fall more and more on the teachers in the classrooms to reach all students, (while simultaneously increasing class sizes that cripple the time we have to spend with each student).

To replace these resources, disciplinary policies and the role of the police in our schools increases. As we cut funding for resources (I'm focusing on education - but this same argument can be made for any community or city at large), we rely heavily on law and order to get the help that is needed. An increased reliance on police officers is not only increasing in the society at large, but also *inside of schools*. To repeat: we are seeing an increase in police presence within our public schools. These officers hold the title of "school resource officer" (the name implies a much nicer job than what they do). The students most widely affected by an increase in law enforcement are our special needs students and our students of color.

Let me stop for a moment. For those of you who are in disbelief, let me assure you: I have seen police officers walking around public-school campuses in full gear. Let me also remind you that I am currently an elementary teacher. This means these locked and loaded police officers are walking around schools for children 5-12 years of age. What kind of message does this send to our children? How do you think they feel seeing police officers walking around their schools on a regular basis?

The final step in the pipeline involves the juvenile justice system which inherently withholds equity in the justice it serves predominantly shown in the disparities between White and Black children. When students are continuously sent out of class, suspended, expelled, and ultimately engaging with the school resource officer, *we halt their education time and time again* causing them to repeatedly fall behind in their studies. As they fall behind, they are more likely to be sent out of the classroom again. This is how we are failing our kids. Bigger class sizes, less resources, and less funding for supplies cannot equal a better education, no matter how hard teachers work at providing it for our students. As these students fall behind again and again, they may find themselves encountering the resource officer, and ultimately getting pushed into the juvenile justice system. Within the JJS, 80% of the children don't have proper representation to help plead their case or receive equitable justice (according to ACLU studies). Ultimately, these kids are sent to a juvenile detention center where they are not provided an education (educational services are rare in juvenile detention centers). In turn, these students end up being more likely to *continue into the prison system*.

This happens because there is only one direction by design: school-to-prison. There is no design for prison-to-school rehabilitation: the system is not set up to rehabilitate kids to reenter the school system from the judicial system.

The systematic destruction of our BIPOC students is so ingrained in our society, that even those of us who admit, understand, and know the school-to-prison pipeline, have biases that contribute to the system. Black students are more likely to get in trouble and be forced into this system. Even without meaning to, well-intentioned teachers are perpetuating this cycle. Even without meaning to, well-intentioned people on the periphery of the education system are perpetuating this cycle (racism is so ingrained in our society as a whole).

Okay, so what's your point, Lindsey? Let me be clear: systemic racism begins with our students in the education system and from there, continues into the society at large. There is not a

disconnect, *the system was designed this way from start to finish*. As an educator, who works in a system that is vilifying and hurting our Black students the most, I have to be hyper-vigilant and deliberate with how I attack racism within my classroom and within my school. I'm not perfect in this, I can promise you that. I must check my privilege time and time again, as a white teacher to BIPOC students. How do I do this? **I read, listen, learn and grow - and when I know better, I do better.**

As an educator, reading, listening, writing and speaking are of the utmost importance to students progressing in their studies. So, here's my ask...are you ready? The systemic racism is jarring and blaring in our society right now. If we, as Sufis, want to be a guiding light of love, harmony, and beauty in our world, we must revolutionize our own message and do the hard spiritual work. Right here, right now. We cannot be complacent and only perform love and light. How can we sit by, as we tell our children they can be all that they want to be, while society holds them in their place by a knee to their necks? We must all do this work together; we cannot rely on our babies to be the only ones learning and growing. It won't be easy, beloveds. It's not easy to look inward at our own biases and shortcomings, or to talk about racism as a systemic issue. But, if we can ask our tiniest of humans to do it, we must be willing to do it ourselves.

Read. Listen. Write. Speak. Learn. Grow. Show up. Allow yourselves to make mistakes. Allow your allyship to the Black community to be an imperfect struggle. Allow that struggle to exist and fester - don't turn away from it simply because it isn't pretty. This is where the collective magic happens. This is where our Sufi community can progress. This is the spiritual work. If we want to be "united with all the Illuminated Souls," we must mean all. Black lives matter.

- Lindsey Azalee Molineaux