



Shame as a Challenge to Racial Equity in Schools

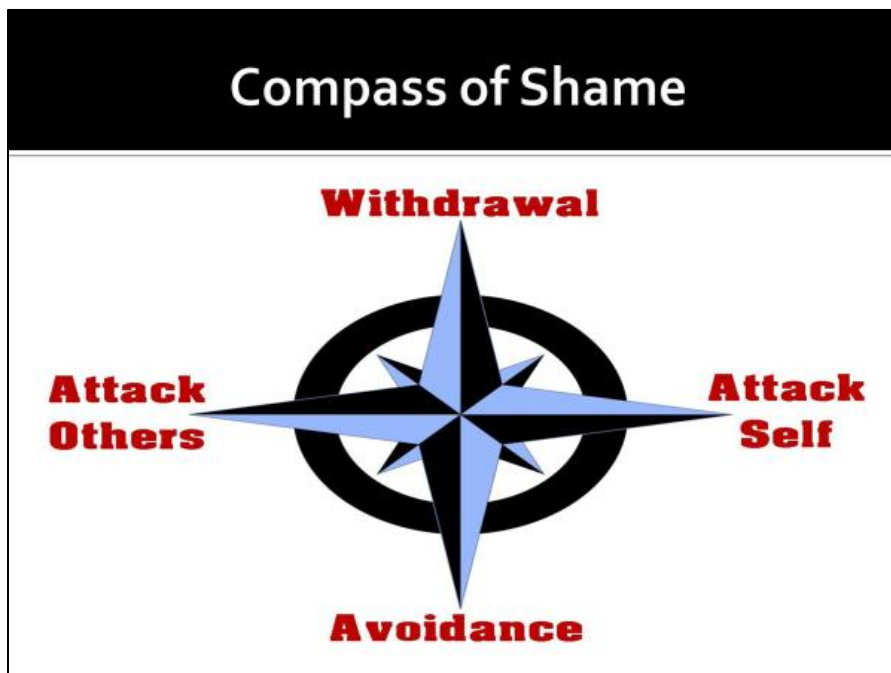
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“It is not more uncomfortable to talk about race than to experience racism.”

-Erin Baugher

We have had the honor of working with educators across the United States on their journeys to face the greatest challenges in serving children well. Without question, the most challenging issue is racism. While the data clearly shows correlations with race and how we serve children, too often, facing those truths brings up negative emotions and responses. The Restorative Practitioner in me views this discomfort and the subsequent actions as probably an unhealthy and unproductive response to shame. We talk about shame a lot in our Restorative work and I’d like to offer an analysis here which might help understand our challenges and pushback around racial equity.

When we see the walls come up and the defensiveness rise when we speak about white privilege, implicit bias and structural racism, we are seeing folks’ intuitive response to the feeling of being “called out.” The almost natural feeling is shame, but normally that corrosive, always negative type of shame that we call stigmatizing shame, which leaves no room for redemption and restoration.



We can use the Compass of Shame, an important tool in Restorative Practices, to illustrate this better. The Compass provides a lens to understand how we can respond to the shame of facing racism within ourselves and others. For instance, some respond to this work by Attacking Others. This looks like the accusations of reverse racism (which is as illogical as it is pretentious) and race baiting. The aim here is to attack and invalidate those raising the concern because their

suggestion of racism is more harmful than your own possible racism.

Next we have the Attack Self response to shame, which sees one owning their challenges but applying a deficit lens to themselves. This looks like the guilt we see often by liberal folks, who want to hyper cleanse their labels and language and try to absolve the stain of their shame of racism through charity and saving those poor “minority” kids. We can applaud some of the good intentions here but challenge them nevertheless, since that self-deprecating shame is not sustainable and ultimately leads to bitterness and frustration.

We know what the Avoidance approach sounds like. We’ve all heard, and some of us have said: “I don’t see color.” “I’m color-blind.” Or “We don’t have those problems here, we have people of color on our staff,” except when you look, they are all concentrated in very specific positions and roles in the building. This response is rooted in trying to hide the problem even from ourselves.

Lastly, the shame response of Withdrawal acknowledges that there is a problem but I don’t want any parts of it. It looks like a friendly veneer but unwillingness to engage in the challenges of racial inequity and injustice. They disengage either physically, mentally or emotionally from the discourse, opting rather to have safe, more comfortable conversations about sports, curriculum or the weather.

I believe that if we use the Compass of Shame as a lens, it allows us to understand how people can respond negatively to the important conversation around racism and racial equity. This allows us and them to unpack their own private logic on the issue and begin pivoting towards building an antiracism approach to serving our beautiful children.

About Dr. Muhammad:

For nearly three decades, Dr. Abdul-Malik Muhammad has been serving both youth and adults as an educator, transformational leader, entrepreneur, and author. He is the founder and CEO of Akoben LLC, Transforming Lives Inc., author of *The Restorative Journey – Book One: The Theory and Application of Restorative Practices* and contributing author of *Colorizing Restorative Justice: Voicing Our Realities*.