

NATIONAL BOARD

for Professional Teaching Standards®

Luke Correia-Damude:

Well, we're back everyone. I'm so happy to be sharing another amazing episode of National Board conversations with you. This is episode six. I have Sharif El-Mekki here with me. He's an incredible veteran of the education profession in America. He is an inspiring teacher motivational figure and just an all-around interesting guy. We had a fascinating conversation that focused a lot around equity and inclusion, about empowering people of color and teachers of ethnically diverse backgrounds to really become those pillars for their community, for their students, and to also make a reciprocal experience for their students. So that not only as a student learning from the teacher, but the teacher is learning from the student. I was really happy to talk to Sharif. I'm so excited to share this episode with you. So without further ado, here's Sharif El-Mekki.

Luke Correia-Damude:

Hey Sharif. How are you?

Sharif El-Mekki:

Good, great to be here. How's everything?

Luke Correia-Damude:

Oh, good. Doing great. I'm looking forward to this conversation. So thanks for joining us.

Sharif El-Mekki:

A pleasure.

Luke Correia-Damude:

Tell the audience about yourself. Why don't you introduce yourself, tell us about who you are and just a little kind of logline or thesis statement of Sharif.

Sharif El-Mekki:

Sure, sure. So my name is Sharif El-Mekki, I'm the CEO of the Center for Black Educator Development. I was a teacher and principal for 26 years, all in three schools across West Philadelphia.

Luke Correia-Damude:

How did you get into teaching? What made you want to become a teacher?

Sharif El-Mekki:

As I reflect on my early years several of my teachers, you know as well as my mother and cousins who were also educators, I think they planted the seeds young, even though it wasn't explicitly discussed like, "Hey, you should consider becoming a teacher," the only person that did, that was my martial arts teacher who was actually my favorite Black male educator. I was born to two parents who were activists. They were part of the Black Panther Party so we were raised in a household that really supported us in looking at justice, looking at different perspectives and views of what the quality of life could be. What equity injustice could be. I attended a elementary school that was a freedom school that

was started by Black activists. I think it really just laid a foundation for me between home and school. I was committed to activism growing up, even though I wasn't sure where exactly that was going to take me, I thought I would eventually end up as a lawyer. I think one of the things that I, I recognized, that was really pointed out to me by Dr. Martin Rider, a Black man who met with a group of us to ask us to consider becoming teachers. He was in partnership with the school district of Philadelphia, where he worked at an organization called concerned Black men at Cheyney University, the first HBCU (historically Black college or university), they were creating a partnership to get more Black men to teach. So it was an alternative certification program. I had recently graduated from Indiana University of Pennsylvania in Western Pennsylvania. When I went to the meeting I thought I wasn't interested, you know, a friend a friend's mother called me, mama Cynthia told me about the program. I promised I would go to at least visit, but I was very skeptical about this opportunity and if it was the right fit for me, but then going to the meeting, seeing all these brothers there, seeing and hearing Dr. Martin rider with some other educators, I was intrigued. I thought, you know what, this might be what I was looking for my entire life. Even though it was a very young life at the time, and now 27 years later, I am so grateful that mama Cynthia called and that Dr. Martin Rider and the team that he worked with had this opportunity for brothers like me.

Luke Correia-Damude:

Why is it important to empower Black men to teach? Why was Dr. Martin Rider out there talking to you about this?

Sharif El-Mekki:

I think it's always been important for Black men to participate in the education of our children. Black men do it informally in so many ways, coaching, mentoring in the barbershop, whispered in the kid's ear and encouraging them. All of those spaces that you find, Black people you'll find Black men and women, but you know, we're talking about Black men right now, who are mentoring, supporting Black children and each other. So I think that often gets lost and the schools become a space where you don't find as many Black men even though their mentorship, their voice, their guidance, their experiences are so crucial, so important in children's upbringing. You often don't find them in schools. They're not encouraged to be in schools when they are in schools they are often looked at as disciplinary actions and not true educators. So I think it's really important for our students, particularly Black boys, to be able to engage and interact with Black leaders in schools which are usually overwhelmingly, filled and led by white women. I think across the United States of America, only 2% of public school teachers are Black men. So the lack of diversity overall and particularly acutely for Black men I think is a disservice to all children, including white children who need to see a diverse group of educators and leaders in their schools.

Luke Correia-Damude:

The need for proportionate representation is huge. Have you seen it changing over the years when you look back on it? What's your take on that?

Sharif El-Mekki:

I think actually, no, I think we are stuck. It would need a massive intervention. In Philadelphia, I remember a couple of years ago, there were about 4% Black male teachers in the city, the recent crop of new teachers in 2018 is 7% of the new teachers were Black men. So they have almost doubled the incoming class, which is a positive trend. We have to double down and build on that. Fortunately, our leadership at Pennsylvania department of ed, started by secretary Pedro Rivera, and now Dr. Noe

Ortega was the Aspire to Educate Program. This initiative basically supports diversifying the teaching, their workforce and improving the teacher workforce. There's a consortium of IETS non-profits, teacher certification programs, and the school district, all working in unison to try to right the ship to improve educational equity and justice by ensuring a more diverse teacher workforce. So I'm encouraged, there is still a long way to go. There's not even a moment to celebrate any small wins. But I do think we should give a nod, a handshake, a high five, and a hug, and then get right back to work.

Luke Correia-Damude:

What can teachers do to make sure that they are offering an equitable experience to their students, that they make their classroom an open space, and that they are mindful of all their students, the communities and cultures that surround them? What kind of things can teachers be doing?

Sharif El-Mekki:

It's hard to know what they may not have thought of, but what I would encourage people to do is, one, have a high level of cultural humility. Understand that you are there as a learner as well, and that students have something to teach you. You don't come in knowing everything about every child. Number two, the best intervention you could have to celebrate student learning is strong relationships with parents. The respect of parents as partners in the work of educating their children to develop relationships and trust with not only the students, but those who sent them to you. Avoid having a deficit lens about the communities that you're supposed to be serving, having high expectations for yourself and your students, but not just telling yourself, "Oh, I have high expectations." Ask your students, seek their data, seek their feedback. So even if your school or your district doesn't do parental surveys or student surveys, as an educator, you should do that. You should do an equity audit in your own instruction. You should ask students of color, "How do you experience my classroom? How do you experience being a student? What does that look and feel like?" You know, sometimes I know educators who've followed their students' footsteps for a day, literally pretending to be a student and following the class schedule. Unfortunately, several of the ones that I spoke to who did this type of equity audit were horrified, mortified about the experiences when sitting in the student's desk and experiencing it. With students that should never happen. So those are the things that we need to be open about, be humble and courageous about addressing, including if we find it in our own personal practices. When we look in the mirror, we should be honest because sure enough, when we're looking at our students, they'll know if we're not being honest.

Luke Correia-Damude:

We're gathered here today to talk about national board certification and that pursuit of excellence in the field of education. You yourself don't have the certification, is that correct?

Sharif El-Mekki:

I don't, regrettably, I wish I did and I think as a principal, it is something that I would find extremely valuable. I know with certainty that our students would benefit from having a school full of National Board Certified Teachers, but also just the profession as a whole both in a micro level within our school, as well as in our school system, in the city, state, as well as country. So I just applaud the work that the National Board team does on a daily, weekly and yearly basis to elevate the profession, to help teachers hone their craft and to push for outcomes. At the end of the day, working in the school or being a student is all about achievement and so we have to define achievement as how the educator, how the teacher is achieving as well as how the student is achieving. These outcomes are crucial and it is organizations like National Board that are leading the way in this effort.

Luke Correia-Damude:

As a principal, you must have had many teachers over the years into the different schools coming to you and telling you that they're considering pursuing the National Board certification. What do you have to say to them when they tell you that they are thinking about going through this journey?

Sharif El-Mekki:

I think a big part is supporting in the feedback loop. So the beautiful thing about getting your National Board certification is the amount of reflection, the amount of practice and feedback that you accept, you know it reminds me of even when I was recruiting teachers to work, you know, hiring new teachers, one of the biggest things besides content knowledge and they're mindsets about the communities that that we were in was their coachability. How did they internalize feedback? How did they synthesize it and use it? How did they know, how did they view coaching and development both internally from their own agency and self-efficacy as well as their relationship with experts in the field? The better our teachers are, the better our principals are and the better our student outcomes.

Luke Correia-Damude:

So within the school setting as a principal, you're definitely recommending this certification to the teachers of the faculty.

Sharif El-Mekki:

The beautiful thing about it is that not just at my school, anywhere I go, I am really sharing what I believe is one of the best ways to develop yourself is, through the National Board certification process. So it's not just within one particular school it's across our city as well as nation. It is a crucial aspect of being a constant learner and always looking to grow in our effectiveness.

Luke Correia-Damude:

In terms of equity and inclusion, do you feel like this process can help with that for a teacher, for their pedagogy, for their practice?

Sharif El-Mekki:

Absolutely. What I'm hoping is that I know there's a really strong and important campaign within National Board for Professional Teaching Standards to increase the diversity and to increase the levels of support and to look at certification through an equity lens. I've looked at the data across each state and some States are doing better than others. Some States are being very deliberate about how they're going to support more teachers of color to become National Board certified. So when you look at things such as teacher equity, which students get the most experienced teachers, the most effective teachers, the most veteran teachers, the most National Board certified teachers, we have to look at that and see which students are getting that, which students are most in need for the highest qualified teachers. Those, those are things that we have to look deeply at and then mitigate for whatever barriers are there and address them. You know when professor Roy says, "there's really no such thing as the voiceless, there are only the deliberately silent or the preferably unheard." That can be directly applied to the students in our schools. So if we want to get out of this space and recognize that they have a voice, but are we trying to mute it and marginalize it, or are we trying to help them amplify it? That's a different mindset. If we've seen that the solutions are within the minds and experiences of the youth, then we're going to try to tap into that. If we're essentially trying to be problem solvers, they are closest to the problems and the solutions. Yes, we're going to educate them, we're going to mentor them, we're

going to support them, but we're also going to listen to them. We're also going to tap into what they know and they'll help us become better. Because every time you look at a movement, it's been in the hands of the youth. So we have to look at these opportunities as fleeting. We can't continue to ignore the youth and not allow them to share the leadership, share the space. You know what, sometimes we just got to get out of their way. Right?

Luke Correia-Damude:

I do think that's right and I think it's a perfect thought to end on. Truly we're just scratching the surface on some of these ideas in the subject matter that we were talking about today. So lucky for you, Sharif is a part of another podcast called, "Eight Black Hands" that you can access wherever you get your podcasts, Google, Spotify, all that. Please check it out. It'll give you a whole lot more to think about and it's a really amazing podcast. They're up to almost a hundred episodes already. So get listening. In the meantime, if you'd like to learn more about National Board Certification, please visit the website at www.nbpts.org. Until next time, my name is Luke Correia-Damude signing off. Thank you so much for joining us.