

Mindful Equity Podcast Episode 5

James Coleman: Welcome along to another episode of the TEMZ podcast. My name is James Coleman and as always, we're here to shine a light on all things mentoring within education. This week we chat with Aretha Banton and Youlande Harrowell, both Senior Leaders within schools and the founders of Mindful Equity UK. We talk about their journeys to leadership as two black women within education, and what impact they hope to have through working collaboratively with schools and leaders across the country. So as always, settle down, take a breath and grab a cup of tea as we hope you enjoy the latest episode of, The TEMZ Podcast.

Okay, I'm delighted to say I've got Youlande and Aretha with me now. Good evening, guys.

Aretha Banton: Hi James

Youlande Harrowell: Hi James

JC: Thank you very much for taking time out of your very hectic schedules. It's seven o'clock on a Wednesday of a school week. So, I'm very grateful for you both being here.

Youlande Harrowell: Oh, happy to be here.

JC: Brilliant. So, you guys are set up Mindful Equity. Talk to me a little bit and it only needs to be a brief overview about how, why, when, Mindful Equity came to be?

YH: Sure. So, I'll start on that, I think. So, Aretha and I had the pleasure of working with each other for the part, a year ago, for entire academic year and during lockdown, which we know affected teachers in a very different way because it wasn't really a lockdown for us, it was very much a change in a pause to the way schools normally run. So Black Lives Matter became very prevalent, and it triggered a conversation around not only our experiences, our personal experiences within education, within the pipeline, and growing into Senior Leadership, but also how two black women ended up in the same Senior Leadership team. But more importantly, why that felt like such a special and unique moment. After some self-reflection, we both realise that there's a lot of similarities between our journeys of it not necessarily being a straight path. We unpicked what it was that really helped us achieve the success that we've had in our careers. We identified that there was clearly support from what we call allies, those people who they may be men, they may be white men that that or, or women in our in our lives, who have championed us, who have spotted our talent, and offered that support when needed to guide us through the career that is the vocation if you will that is teaching. In addition to that, it's going right back to the beginning and thinking what else could have actually been in place to speed up this process to ensure that we were very clear from the very beginning, what it meant to be a leader. We're very clear that there are some nuanced experiences for black and Asian women coming up through the ranks and it really prompted us to say we need to take action on this so that more women feel that they are able to break that glass ceiling. More black and Asian women are able to break that glass ceiling and make it into leadership. Essentially, it led to us thinking we are going to take action, we're going to remain in the profession, we're going to disrupt the system from within and create this this business which we do in our time outside of our full time jobs both of us our senior leaders in schools. Aretha beautifully summarises the sort of three core strands of our business. So yes, we've got three core strands. So, the first strand is our Inner Together Network and that comprises of some events. We have mentoring that we offer our network participants and really it's just about demystifying the career pathway and enabling them to plot their pathway, but also gain the self-confidence to action, their pathway. And then we have our Consultancy Strands where we work with companies or settings on really embedding diversity and

equality in their settings in their workplaces, and championing people from diverse backgrounds into leadership. And then we have a Research Strand which is really a call to action to researchers. Just trying to get people to recognise the lack of research in this area and motivate them to get going and produce some more.

JC: In terms of education, what are the facts? What's the data relating to these issues? What is it that's, what are the issues that are very much there at the moment for us.

YH: So, one thing that definitely did trigger this conversation that Aretha I had a few months ago now is that I noticed from the Government Work Census, it identified that particularly in Senior Leadership, if you break that down by gender, if you break it down by race, the numbers of black and Asian women who are making it through the ranks in Senior Leadership are minimal. Specifically, in Headship, we only have about 1% of Head Teachers who are from a black, Asian ethnic minority background. Now, the issue with some of this is that BAME as an acronym encompasses quite a number of races and cultures and backgrounds. So, to pin it down to being 1%, is clearly not representative of the society that we live in. Furthermore, if you're looking at Senior Leaders, who are Assistant Heads and Deputy Heads, only 0.1% of them are from a black African background, Chinese and mixed backgrounds. So even within that 0.1%, black African specifically makes a minor part of that and so those disparities, particularly in the leadership roles, are again, what prompted us to consider creating this this organisation.

JC: I know, for both of you well certainly Youlande, I know, I've heard you speak about it. One of your first roles within a school you had someone to look up to. You had, I don't know if it's a female black senior leader within your school, is that right?

YH: Yes, that's correct. When I was in secondary school, my Head Teacher, when I was a teenager, not so long ago, was a black woman. And yeah, I mean, the impact that that had on me having that role model who's very visible, very active, and also very successful in her role that she was awarded an OBE for her impact in education. It meant the world It meant that I could dream and achieve and feel that I could be like her, if you don't see what you'd like to be, you're not going to be able to achieve it in the end. We both say that you can't be what you can't see and how important representation is so yeah, definitely that it highlights the need for this conversation, it highlights the need for the actions that need to take place.

JC: Aretha, did you have anyone similar in your career, or was it very much self-led by you?

AB: I didn't have anyone similar in my career, I just had role models in my family that were incredibly strong black women. My family's full of black women, very few males. So, we kind of ruled the roost in that regard. Just watching them move through the education system, and take the most difficult pathway into their respective careers. So, they go into social work, they've been teaching and all sorts, but they've just it's taken them so long to get to the managerial levels and, and watching their determination, that was what did it for me and, you know, come back to something that my Aunt said to me when I was about eight years old, she just said, 'You know, just make sure whatever job you get be a Manager because you can't take orders from anybody.' And that stuck with me, because that is just literally the aspirational lid just lifting. That glass ceiling saying, well actually, you know, I'm not going to be stuck taking any direction I'm going to start leading. To have that instilled in me and to see that within my role models from my family. That's what drove me.

JC: So Aretha, do you think without those role models within your family environment, do you think you'd have had those role models from your school life from you know, what society have given you in your both schooling when you were younger? And then your chosen career?

AB: No, no, I know. I wouldn't go into details but no, definitely not! I definitely haven't taken the straight routes into teaching. And I think you've referenced the bendy pipes conversation I had at the Chartered College and that was very much about taking different routes into education. You know, you don't necessarily have to do the straight school, college or school, sixth form into University and then back into the classroom as a teacher. A lot of people especially BAME women don't do that route. But that brings a lot of other skills and a lot of depth that they can bring to that career in the classroom, or in that career leadership in education. I think it's recognising those roots, and might be slightly different for the people that perhaps you mentor or perhaps you work with, and then using those roots to that to their advantage by drawing out the skills that can be transferred over into education.

JC: Because I guess one of the issues that's coming into my head, one of the many issues but one of the ones based on this conversation is, if someone who has the potential to go and be brilliant teacher, brilliant senior leader, a brilliant head teacher, who's from a black or minority ethnic background, if they haven't seen that role model, how big an issue that must be. I mean, I, you know, I'm a white male within education and I have nothing but role models, whether it was white females or white males, at throughout my entire schooling and then through university too. So, for me, it was very easy to picture myself in those roles in those positions. I was able to aspire to that, because it was what I'd seen all the way through growing up. It's very difficult for me to imagine growing up in a world where I don't have that person to look up to. Where I don't have that person to aspire to be. How difficult and how much of a challenge is that for BAME women specifically trying to, you know, make a career within education?

YH: I think a nice analogy that I've been mulling over this week while at school, is I'm currently working with two students at my school who are applying to Oxbridge and, and when you get, any teacher knows if a child wants to venture into applying to Oxbridge, you have to encourage them and build their confidence up and then start talking about the interview and then to build them up again for that. But imagine being a black child, who is going into that, that situation, knowing full well that when you walk into that room, more often than not, you are the only black child in that room. And for some of them, particularly those coming from London, that is a very unnerving experience. How does that link to what you just asked? Well, imagine you're a black woman, an Asian woman, and you are considering going into leadership, but you look above you, and not a single person looks like you. It's that same feeling. It's that lack of confidence. It's that, who do I turn to? Who do I see looks like me who could tell me that this is okay? And almost Give me that that self-efficacy to push forward and a trial attempt to apply for these sorts of roles.

JC: I think one of the one of the interesting things, just trying to think of looking at this through the lens of a mentor or someone who's involved in supporting colleagues within school. We have lots of mentors who will be listening to the podcast. If, if you're if you're not from a BAME background, but you're a mentor who's supporting black or Asian women who's within education, what can that mentor do to be as you spoke about at the very start, to be an ally? What can they do to support their mentee? How can they be part of the solution?

AB: I think it's about you know, developing the values and visions themselves as a mentor in the first and foremost, you know, inclusion doesn't just mean tick box tokenism, it actually means doing things, taking it through to action, and then evaluating and reviewing it and then moving it forward later on. So, if without that starting point, and without that commitment to inclusion, then we're kind of stuck and that needs to change. I think that's where a lot of people do fall down. Once you are committed to inclusion there's loads of stuff that you can do and it isn't really about creating a space. I think, as Youlande said you know, if you look above you, and there's no one there, what do

you do, and you can't always have those conversations with confidence with people in your environment or your education setting. And I think it's about creating a space that is welcoming and tolerant and enables discussions to take place. Because we don't, you can't do a one size fits all thing for every single BAME women in education, it needs to be tailored to their needs. And it needs to be tailored to their view of what education looks like in their aspirations. So, I always say if you're mentoring someone at the early stages of their career, talk about their goal. Yes, talk about classroom practice. Yes, talk about you know, behaviour management, when they've had a really rubbish day in the year eights are kicking off. But also talk about where they want to be, what is their long-term vision, get them to start looking further than the next day or the next observation. Get them start plotting their career forward. And that's, that's the key bit because that's again, lifting that aspiration that's lifting the glass ceiling, and saying, you know what you can do it, I can give you the confidence to. I can show you the routes, because one of the things is sometimes you just don't know the route that we ought to be taking. And when, for me when I was mentored and championed by you know, people in my schools, they were always white men, and you can't get further from my demographic than a white male. So, their pathway was not my pathway. They passed away the barriers they face, we're not going to be my barriers. They gave me really inspirational journeys, but they couldn't give me that discrete pathway and I think it's combination of both. It's inspiring, providing the confidence, lifting that lid, but also trying to find out ways that you can meet the needs of their bespoke pathways. What else might you need to do and it might take some innovative practice, it might mean looking out the box, it might be speaking to colleagues. But once you do that you then get a more holistic wraparound service.

JC: One of the, one of the, you've posted recently on your Twitter feed, a quote from Brené Brown and we were speaking before the podcast about how inspirational some of her research is and the quote was 'Truth and courage aren't always comfortable, but they're never weaknesses.' And it rang true with me because some of the conversations around these issues are uncomfortable, certainly for me to have purely because I'm, I'm probably not as informed in these areas as I would want to be. I wasn't aware or as aware of these issues as I would want to be. And in order to inform yourself in order to learn and in order to become more knowledgeable myself, I need to have uncomfortable conversations and I think Aretha you're just talking about having space and an environment in which you're comfortable to talk about those things, and I think that's really important for anyone who wants to be an ally, or anyone who wants to support this movement, is that some of those uncomfortable conversations are the conversations that we need to start having.

YH: Most definitely, and I think particularly is like honing in on that word. I mean, firstly, I should probably say how much I do love Brené Brown, I think she's incredible. But I highly recommend you listen, to listen to what she has to say, read what she's written, incredible. But honing in on that word vulnerability, when you're going into that mentor meeting, my biggest inspiration when I talk about an ally, one thing she always said to me was that the membrane between 'the emotional membrane between personal professional and education is wafer thin.' So where as a mentor, if you're going into that meeting, and you're not feeling vulnerable about the conversations that you know you have to have with this person, because you're trying to really open up their doors and allow them to feel particularly these black and Asian women, you're trying to allow them to know that it's okay for them to aspire, that they should aspire, you have to and you will I tell you now you're going to feel uncomfortable. Because it's a conversation that perhaps has never been one that's been at the forefront of your mind to have and much like Aretha has spoken about already about that confidence gap that black and Asian women come to the table with. If we're not talking about how to build that confidence up, what are their barriers, hear from them how they're feeling about even considering that idea. Look at their body language when they're talking about it. Having that space where you can feel vulnerable, it's where you'll hear the truth. It's where courage can be

built, and where movements and positive change can come from. So, I highly encourage these sort of vulnerable, open conversations to occur in those mentor relationships and meetings

JC: I think that, you know, away from our, you know, slightly narrow conversation today in view of mindful equity and everything. Drawing that out to what TEMZ is about more generally, being a mentor, that idea of vulnerability between you and your mentee is, you know, transformational potentially. Because like you say, if you, if you can't show vulnerability, then it's very difficult for the person opposite you to be able to openly reflect upon their own performance or whatever it is that you're mentoring for. You've got to lead that conversation in the right way.

YH: 100%

JC: From the perspective of you guys and Mindful Equity and what you're building, what's your vision? What's your goal? What's the blue-sky thinking? You know, what do you think is reasonable for you to aim to achieve in the next few years with what you're building?

AB: Gosh, that's a big question. I don't think we thought that far ahead.

JC: Sorry, Aretha! You're four months in already throwing these sorts of things at you.

AB: So, yeah, go on sorry.

JC: No, no. Even if it's, you know, something that in your head, you think, you know, that's probably completely unachievable in the time space that we've got. What is it you would love to see? What real impact would you love to have in the next few years?

AB: Yeah, the, for us. The end goal is really to change the way that leadership looks around the tables. And we have lots of people who may be Middle Leadership who are struggling to break through into Senior Leadership. We have people in Senior Leadership who may be stuck at a Assistant Principal role and can't move into Headship. And it's really just to change the landscape and the way that leadership looks when you're sat around those leadership tables, making those decisions. Because until that happens, we don't have an equitable educational system, because not all voices are being heard. And therefore, not all voices are directing the policies and not all voices are directing the processes, not all policy, not all voices are directing policies at government level either. So, it really is about changing the dynamic and changing the way that people enter leadership and changing the mindset of people that are already there. So that they start thinking about actually how can we become involved and change the dynamic? And that is a really, probably a bit of a wishy-washy answer but, but that is the long term vision, because that's when I feel like, you know, we've done it, we've done what we set out to do. And it is about encouraging black and Asian women to be part of that journey and end up being at that table making the decisions and supporting others to think differently. And yeah, Youlande is there anything you want to add?

YH: You summed it up beautifully. It wasn't wishy-washy at all. I think it ends with that policy change. Because if it comes from both ends, we're working very much as Aretha described at the Grassroots, right, the action where new careers are starting, where they're where they're building and growing, and people are curating and thinking and synthesising of what education could look like in a few years time. However, if at the top the leaders, those who are making the policies and directing or creating, if you will get the NPQ's, for example, we're not going to see the change will just keep hitting concrete wall after the concrete wall. So really, in the end, there has to be policy change within the field of education. And as Aretha said, around who is appointed into leadership,

how those appointments are made, because that recruitment process, again, there's another aspect of what I'm talking about coming from the top, as well as it coming from the bottom as well.

JC: I guess to get to that point, it's hundreds, potentially thousands of little steps with lots of people being involved across a wide range of different environments, and schools and whatever else we're, NASBTT obviously very involved with ITT and it strikes me that there's a real opportunity, and I know you guys work very closely with early career teachers and trainees. It strikes me there's a huge opportunity for ITT providers to be part of the solution to this. To be aware of what they can do to be an ally, and to support the journey. So, for people who are involved in ITT or listening to this, what can they do? How can they be involved in, you know, empowering black and Asian women to believe that they're capable, and that there is a path and a route for them to make it to leadership, if that's what they want?

YH: Absolutely. It boils down to diversity and inclusion not being a bolt on. It boils down to providers, ITT providers, thinking about how it can be constantly drip fed, because it may be that in their institution, currently, they don't have a black Asian woman or man, for that matter, for whatever the reasons may be might be context, you might be in the highest parts of Scotland, for all we know, there just might not be that diversity there. However, the conversation is still valid, it is still needed because if it is something that is brought up and thought about through every action that you do, if you're talking about behaviour, is it thought about. When you're talking about teaching or learning is it thought about. If there's a constant thread that runs through the core of what makes your school your institution or training provision, what it is, it will create that space that comforts that sense of confidence to build and grow in those educators, but also the teachers who are allies who are being trained to be those allies of the future. It'll be something that they're already cognisant of, that they are aware of, and also that they feel more comfortable to talk about it, challenge it, and offer that support when the time arises for them.

JC: Aretha, anything that springs to mind, thank you Youlande. Anything that springs to mind Aretha for ITT providers and people that are involved in either setting up, delivering on those programmes, anything beyond what Youlande spoke about?

AB: Yeah, I think you know, Youlande summed it up really well and I think it is about creating the next generation and making sure that we move on from here. I mean, to be honest, we're having this conversation on the way in the wake of the death in America and some protests around the world. And I think we have to take this moment to reflect on what's come before us, you know, what's happened prior to this, and really think about sustainable actions that have a long lasting impact, because it had like Youlande said, drip feeding that constant dialogue, creating that space, and having actions that are realistic and you mentioned small steps. So small steps, and sustainable. That's the only way that I think we'll be able to make a change and I think ITT providers and the people that are subscribed to these programmes are integral to that because you know, I might retire in about 20 years. I know what I want my legacy to be but actually I need someone to carry that through after I've gone and sunned myself in the Bahamas or whatever! You know, it is about creating that sustainable and what you know, what I'm really conscious of is that emotive conversation and the fear factor behind it. And that's part of what Youlande and I try to do. We try to engage people in a really positive collaborative approach. So that everything's solution focused, because it is a difficult conversation, and it is a challenging thing to do. And there might be blockers that you have to tackle. But it is about making sure that we take that fear away, look at realistic, sustainable solutions. And then we embed them and then you know, what, if it doesn't work, that's where evaluation and review comes in.

JC: We're tight on time, we normally do our top five, and we spoke briefly about this at the start, I'm going to take away any fear factor of having to decide your one person at a dinner table would be just because I'm enjoying the conversation.

AB: That's the only answer I've had!

YH: How about now?

JC: Okay, I'll tell you what, I'll let you both. We can end the podcast with you telling me who the one person you'd have at your dinner party would be. Is that okay?

AB: Yeah, Barack Obama.

JC: Okay

YH: Brené Brown at the minute.

JC: Well, that wasn't the end, guys. But I will, I'll take both answers, that's fine. What I did want to talk about before we go, and again I you know, this is for the TEMZ will have a lot of mentors and ITT providers tuning in. But I also want to talk about what the impact of all these positive little steps can have on the children that we teach. Because ultimately, the only reason any of us are here is because we want to impact positively on the children within our schools. That's what motivates anyone to be in education pretty much. If you're in it for the money, then that was a terrible choice of career! But um, what sort of impact? And, you know, not just, we touched on it a little bit. And I think it's really important to highlight that by being inclusive by being aware of these things, by having the difficult conversations, what sort of impact does that have on every child, not just black children, Chinese children, whoever it is. What impact does that have on every single child within a school context?

YH: Oh, I love that question. There is a study that was conducted by McKinsey. And what they found is that organisations that have diverse leadership teams, they earned 3%, sorry, three times more financial yield than organisations that didn't have diverse boards. Because by having more diverse teams, in the first instance, you're also going to bring in diverse thoughts and other ideas of essentially how the organisation can be moved forward from perspectives you perhaps may not have thought of. What impact that directly has on the students is that they begin to see what society could and does look like. Because I always say that schools are the microcosms of societies that are, are about to, to become, because the children were breeding, not breeding, we are rearing and taking and growing and nurturing the society of the future. And if our young people are not exposed to the society that we'd like them to have in the future, then our school environment isn't fit for purpose. It allows students to, to aspire, and it grows confidence. If they can see someone whether they be a white child, or a black child, Chinese child, any race, if they can see diverse people in power, people making those decisions about behaviour, making those decisions about curriculum, what they study, it really encourages them to believe that actually, there's anything that they could do.

JC: So to kind of wrap things up, it would be really nice to hopefully end on a positive note. And because I think despite the fact that these are difficult conversations, and it's a shame that, you know, education or society, maybe more generally is in this position. It would be really nice and I think it's a positive thing that we are now having these conversations, and it is at the forefront of people's minds. What can people do, mentors, trainees, members of training providers, when they walk through the door tomorrow morning, if they're listening to this, and they're feeling empowered

and they want to make a difference? What can those people do on the ground tomorrow morning, as a starting point? And then equally, how can they find you guys Mindful Equity? How can they go in and find you guys to engage in more longer term?

AB: Yes, I think that quick wins, the quick takeaways would be literally to create that space. So, first of all, you need to kind of have a conversation with yourself and reflect on those barriers that might be in the way. But the quickest thing to do is scheduling a time to reflect, scheduling a time to have the conversation with your mentee. So, you're creating that space and actually that dialogue, think about how you're going to phrase that particular dialogue in a way that doesn't make you feel too uncomfortable that stops the conversation, but sets the right tone and before you do that, it might be just have really informal conversation with your mentee. So, you know, what are you aiming for? what do you think? Are your barriers, have a think and come back to me because that's going to be our conversation. And that creates a dialogue where people are kind of thinking, Okay, how am I going to get to the pathway, and they're going to bring a lot of information to you, which you can then use to support them and tailor their package of support.

JC: Great. And in terms of the wider picture thinking, what sort of stuff do Mindful Equity do to support allies or BAME women who want to reach out?

AB: So, in the first instance, we created part of our third strand is that peer network that we create. We namely hashtag #inedtogether. Each academic year, we plan to run bi-termly events. We launched in August, and we were going to have an event in October but I'm sure all educators and mentors can appreciate. We're trying to get back to the new normal and settling in time is important. And actually, some placements have been delayed, etc. So, our next event is happening on Saturday, 12th of December and tickets are available via Eventbrite. And what happens in those events is we have a range of speakers, all educators within the profession, sharing their journey sharing their experiences. There are so many lessons to be learned from those so many powerful takeaways not only for black and Asian women, but also for those allies working alongside those women to support them in their career journey. Furthermore, if you visit our website, which is www.mindfulequityuk.co.uk/ it summarises our journey tells you a little bit about us and things we've been up to all from the beginning of a tweet I posted many months ago to the BBC News broadcasts that myself and Aretha did a few months ago, too. But another useful tool on there would be blogs. And we have quite a number of guest blogs on there. from people such as Dame Alison Peacock and some other educators who have reflected on their journeys, but also their journeys as becoming allies, what work they've been doing tips and tricks that they've offered. There's also a very powerful blog by a black woman who is, has gone through a challenging journey. But why, why they're there is again, to bring those examples to the fore. To allow people to reflect on those. And also steal some tips from these colleagues who have shared their stories in such a powerful way.

JC: Brilliant, thank you guys. And it's been absolutely brilliant to have the opportunity to sit and chat with you guys. Everything you're doing with Mindful Equity is brilliant. And the fact that you're doing it alongside full time Senior Leadership roles is, I tip my hat to you. It's very impressive. I don't think I'd have the energy to even think about it, let alone go ahead and do it. So, thank you so much for taking time out of your evening to chat to us.

YH: Thank thanks so much. Thanks for having us. It's been a real pleasure.

JC: No problem. And best of luck with everything in the future. I look forward to seeing you guys in December. I'll definitely be along at the event. And yes, hopefully we'll get a chance to cross paths again.

AB: Amazing. It's been great. Thank you.

JC: I really enjoyed that one. It was wonderful to have the opportunity to chat with Aretha and Youlande on this week's podcast. A huge thank you to them both for giving up their time. Remember, there's plenty more for teacher educators and mentors to engage with on the TEMZ pages, just visit www.nasbtt.org.uk/TEMZ We will be back in a few weeks' time with our next episode of The TEMZ podcast. In the meantime, thanks for listening. And we'll see you again soon.