Power in our words…

My equity journey began in the guidance office of my high school in a small rural town in Western North Carolina. During my time in high school, I was nowhere near as focused as I am now, but still possessed qualities that would eventually shape my life and career. As a student, I can tell you that my experience was completely different than that of my classmates. I was a student that would disappear in the crowd if you would let me. I was a solid A/B student, but by not being an academically gifted student or incredibly successful athlete, I often slipped through the cracks. I received very little compliments, words of affirmation, or positivity spoken to me by any educator. Also, during this time, my mother was terminally ill and spent most of my high school years in the hospital. It was my junior year, when most of my classmates were beginning to discuss their post-graduation plans, when everything came to a head.

I was one of the best performers/musicians in my high school band. Any accolade that could be achieved in band I was able to attain. One day, my school counselor and I were discussing plans for after high school. It was at that point she mentioned to me: "You are really good at playing the saxophone (which entails working with your hands), you should be an auto mechanic". At that time, I was not quite sure what I wanted to do in my future, but I did know I wanted to continue performing, playing my saxophone and being involved in music. It was my band director that convinced me to go to college because I was good at my instrument. It was my band director who gave me my first experience of positive affirmation from an adult at the school.

Representation Matters…

During college I attended an HBCU (Historically Black College and University). This was important for me because I knew that I was an African American male from a rural background, but I did not know the opportunities that I had. As I previously mentioned, an auto mechanic was a popular trade for African American males in Western NC at the time, or working at the local textile plants. Several of us did not attend college and even less were in the field of education. I feel ashamed to say this, but I didn't know that black people could be anything besides what I saw in my hometown. Of course, I would see on television the typical entertainer and professional athlete, but as I began to take classes in college, I noticed that everyone there was African American; professors, deans, chancellors, everyone! The only doctors I seen where medical doctors, and none of them were African American. On campus, I observed African American doctors (Ph.D.'s and M.D.'s), lawyers, engineers, superintendents and professionals who were leaders in their fields. The first black male that made a lasting impression on my life and who was the first person that I observed in a position of leadership was my college band director. He was the first black band director I had seen. When I saw him and his professionalism, his musicianship and his all-around brilliance I knew exactly what I wanted to be. It was easy to see myself in him, I could see myself being just like him. Our backgrounds were the same, we were both products of small rural towns with a heavy base in church. And although I knew it would take a lot of hard work, I felt that becoming just like my college director was an attainable goal.

All means all

As a HS Band Director, I served at an urban school in central NC. Our school, although urban, was extremely diverse. We were a magnet school and an IB International Baccalaureate School. We had several demographics enrolled in our band and our school. As a band, we were small and developing. Our style of marching band was traditional/high-stepping. As an IB school at the time we had a subgroup of students that refused to march in our band or even be a part of our band, simply because our style, they felt it to be intimidating. So, I spoke with the students and we agreed that we wanted to increase the size and make our band acceptable for everyone in our school demographics. From this conversation we decided to try a hybrid style (a mix between traditional high stepping and corps style marching). This change was met with extreme resistance, not by the community nor the student body, but an assistant principal. We were met with extreme conflict and turmoil as we moved forward with this change. This person continued to place several barriers in our way so that we would not be able to change. At times, this same administrator would question my "blackness" and if I was really "down for the cause." My blackness was being questioned by someone that looked exactly like me. This is an ongoing dilemma that several people face in our profession. Regardless of these negative opinions, our clientele was changing, our demographics were changing, and the school was changing. At the end, I had to have a sit down with everyone involved and my statement was extremely clear, I wanted to produce lifelong lovers of music who could go to NC A&T State University and UNC Chapel-Hill University and be able to be successful and function in both programs. From that point we could all agree that we wanted the same thing and worked together to achieve that goal. Later, that program doubled in size and became one of the largest programs in the district.

These three stories can sum up my equity journey in a few statements…There is a famous quote that reads "My teacher thought I could, so I did". The moments in my life can be summed up as the importance of a teacher's words and how we should always speak positivity into the lives of our students. That no matter what we do as an organization or a music profession we must assure that all involved can seem themselves (SUCCESSFULLY) within our organization and profession. Tradition is great, but so is evolution and at times adults can fear the unknown and place those fears and thoughts on our young students which can hold them back. We must all strive to equip everyone (students, teachers, administrators, and the community) with the tools needed to be successful in all environments.