

the guide for  
white women  
who teach  
black boys

understanding

respecting

connecting

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## “Don’t Lean—*Jump* In”

The Fierce Urgency to Confront,  
Dismantle, and (Re)write the  
Historical Narrative of Black Boys in  
Educational Institutions

**Sharoni Little**

In many schools throughout the country, Black boys are “learning” under a perpetual state of surveillance or hypervisibility.<sup>1</sup> Fueled by a pathological narrative maintaining their inferiority and deficiency, many Black boys languish in schools that undermine their intellectual brilliance and curiosity, ignore and devalue their

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<sup>1</sup> I argue this reality can be understood using Foucault’s notion of the panopticon as a practical metaphor for explaining how social control and power are maintained. In his work on social disciplinary practices, Foucault demonstrated the hegemonic strategy of control through *perpetual surveillance* (Little, 2005). The panopticon is a prison tower where the imprisoned are constantly seen but cannot see if and when they are being guarded. Foucault (1979) contended that: “The major effect of the Panopticon: [Is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effect, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary” (p. 206).

cultural contributions, and instill doubt and anxiety. Studies show that such learning environments impact Black boys' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and overall learning outcomes and contribute to their disproportionate suspension, expulsion, and drop-out rates (Steele & Aronson, 1995, 1998).

As teachers, administrators, and educational institutions seek to address these disparities and create an affirming and inclusive learning environment, there must be, as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1967) declared, a "fierce urgency" to confront, dismantle, and rewrite the educational narrative that has historically plagued Black boys. This chapter examines the institutional mission, policies, practices, and organizational culture of schools and provides various institutional strategies to ensure the educational and personal success of Black boys.

### LEON'S LESSONS?

Leon,<sup>2</sup> a bright, creative, and confident high school senior, has had an educational journey filled with academic curiosity, personal growth, and a passion for business and entrepreneurship. Throughout high school, Leon has participated in several leadership, mentoring, professional, and civic engagement programs. Leon serves as president of his school's entrepreneur club, is a member of the school band, and was elected to the state honor band. In sports, Leon has also been a member of the basketball team and is the first and only Black varsity golfer in his school's nearly seventy-year history.

Pursuing his passion for cars and entrepreneurship, Leon attended a Business Leadership Institute for young men of color, where he learned business fundamentals and devised a business plan that earned him a first-place award and the opportunity to serve as a peer mentor. Committed to enhancing his automotive design, drawing, and technical skills, Leon, the youngest student in his classes, successfully completed courses at a prestigious, world-renowned design college.

In addition to his traditional and entrepreneurial studies, Leon serves as a leader in his community. He is a member of a national youth program that teaches civic engagement and community advocacy, and he has worked as a summer writing mentor and instructor for writing and digital story-telling camps for fourth-to-sixth graders. Leon has also competed and won regionally in the NAACP, ACT-SO program in entrepreneurship and drawing, and he completed 345 hours of community service, earning him a Presidential Service Award.

Fueled by his passion for cars and his professional goal of becoming an automotive designer and manufacturer, Leon's tenacity, leadership, and fortitude has afforded

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<sup>2</sup>"Leon" is a pseudonym to protect the student's privacy.

him many wonderful opportunities. To gain global knowledge and experience, Leon took on a new and exciting challenge to study abroad during his junior year of high school. While many of Leon's teachers affirmed his gregarious, good-natured, and self-assured manner, he also experienced unwarranted scrutiny and critique by a couple of teachers, who appeared uncomfortable and threatened by his presence and steadfast confidence.

Leon is smart and has a sharp eye. His sensitivity for fine materials and harmonious color choice come out in his comments in class and even in the accessories he wears. Ironically, his gift for visual thinking may play a part in his awkward relationship with certain aspects of ancient theory. [It] requires analytical thought, background reading and rethinking first impressions.

This written commentary, an excerpt from Leon's first-quarter performance assessment by his teacher, exemplifies marginalizing, intellectual stereotypes, and deficit teacher expectations that often construct many Black boys in schools as unintelligent and nonanalytical. In her seminal book, *Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom*, noted scholar Lisa Delpit (1995) examines how the presumed deficits and pathologies of historically marginalized, racialized, and underrepresented students are intentionally and falsely promoted to explain social and educational disparities. Because of deficit thinking, these demeaning narratives assert students' supposed lack of motivation and discipline, as well as their cultural and family depravity and their limited intelligence. Deficit lenses prevent a more truthful, humane, and familial view, causing some students to be viewed as "other people's children," denying them the empathy, compassion, and care people would have for their own children or those whom they value.

From the onset of the academic year, Leon's teacher concluded that he, the only Black male, and only Black student in the class, lacked the critical thinking and overall intellectual acumen to understand the subject matter but was gifted "creatively," especially in his clothing and accessories decisions. Driven by her belief that Leon's "deficiencies" warranted additional academic support, his teacher's insistence eventually had an adverse academic and emotional impact. While some of Leon's academic habits and outcomes were the result of his need to improve his study skills, the teacher failed to understand how her low expectations and lack of support might influence his overall learning experience and outcomes. As with many Black boys who face such attacks on their intellect, integrity, or character, the teacher's actions would ultimately push Leon to demonstrate his intellectual fortitude and resilience, while exposing insidious entrenched racial and gender stereotypes, microaggressions, implicit bias, and perpetual surveillance on her part.

Determined that regularly meeting with Leon was the best way to address his apparent learning challenges, his teacher began scheduling conferences during his break time without conferring with him. After Leon could not make one of the meetings she had scheduled due to his own prior arrangements, his teacher became incensed and would later enlist the support of administrators to reify her assumptions and behavior.

In an email sent to administrators (and later shared with his parents), Leon's teacher wrote:

As you know, he left school a moment after I invited him to join me for our most recent meeting (Nov. 3) and kept me waiting the entire period. He has not discussed this inappropriate behavior with me yet. While this episode is a minor issue, I'm more concerned about his struggle to take responsibility for his learning and to accept the help he needs to improve his academic performance.

Elevating this now very contentious situation, some administrators reinforced the teacher's behavior, ignored and diminished Leon's agency, and became an ardent defender of their white female colleague. Ignoring Leon's student status and the inherent power imbalance, he was "adultified" and blamed for his "avoidance" and "lack of accountability," as illustrated in an email he received from an administrator:

We were particularly concerned with your failure during second period this morning to meet your teacher after she sought you out for your scheduled extra-help session. You told her that you would get your materials and be right back. Then, you left the school and never returned to the classroom. You had an explanation for your absence, but you did not share it with her because you rightly understood that she was upset with you. This example served as a great representation of the avoidance behavior you have exhibited in many of your classes. Leon, we want you to more specifically take ownership for your academics and respond by taking advantage of extra-help opportunities offered by your teachers, particularly when you do not understand the material at hand.

Shaped by an antagonistic racist and sexist lens fortifying their implicit bias, the teacher and supporting administrators perceived Leon as a disinterested, irresponsible, and educationally challenged student. Concerned about the emotional and academic impact this situation was having on Leon, his parents spoke with the teacher regarding their concerns and agreed that *Leon* would initiate requests for support, if needed. Clearly angered by this decision, Leon's teacher, who vehemently professed that her actions were merely in his "best interest," continued to convey coy messages littered with deficit sentiments, couched in a patronizing, "I'm just trying to help him" tone:

During the second half of the term, I no longer pursued the weekly meetings I had solicited in the first two months of school in agreement with his mother; Leon is able to take full responsibility for his work and communication. It is worrisome that he has difficulties retaining knowledge. For the second half of this term, I remain available to meet with Leon and encourage him to reconsider his study skills, habits, and time management so he can activate his potential.

His final oral presentation earned a 68%, much higher than his written work, but falling short of gathering visual evidence in support of a logical and overarching argument. I imagine Leon has had little to no practice thinking or writing like this before, especially in regard to visual material. Despite his lackluster performance, I am confident that his natural eye and sensitivity will be his allies in the second term. I am available to meet with him by appointment, as always.

Ignoring how her demeaning and often contradictory communication and behavior might impact Leon's self-efficacy, academic motivation, and performance, his teacher failed him on multiple levels. Despite this onslaught of personal and academic slights, Leon reached out to his teacher regarding a drastically lower participation grade he received although he felt he continued to remain engaged during class. In a personal and contradictory email to Leon, his teacher insinuated that he might have an inability to "concentrate":

I'd be happy to talk with you about all your work and help you get on track. Your participation grade is low because your participation is sometimes rowdy and distracted. Today, for example, it looked like you were dozing off in class. I wonder if you find it hard to concentrate. What has your experience been?

Lacking training or credentials in school or educational psychology, his teacher proceeded to diagnose Leon and to ask him to substantiate her claim. In addition, her use of "sometimes rowdy" to describe his participation was not only contradictory to her "dozing" reference, but rhetorically constructed him using a menacing and threatening lens, often used to reify entrenched violent tropes about Black males. This teacher's behavior and unyielding negative focus on Leon actually led to what she later called a grading "mistake" that resulted in Leon receiving a failing quarter grade. This left him devastated and demoralized until it was corrected due to what she stated was an "unintentional technical mistake."

Despite this year-long assault on his humanity, intellectual curiosity, and emotional stability, Leon continued to thrive and receive a passing grade. Sadly, the

teacher and administrators were surprised, asking him during a meeting the last week of class, “Why did you continue to work hard when it would have been easier to just give up?” Ironically, if these “educators” had recognized, honored, and leveraged Leon’s tenacity and intellectual brilliance from the onset, his experience would have been more personally and academically rewarding.

## INSTITUTIONAL LESSONS

Leon’s academic experience and his teacher’s egregious behavior are unfortunately not anomalous for many Black boys in schools. While the continuum of experiences ranges from various microaggressions to expulsion, Black boys continue to confront racist and sexist stereotypes and oppression in a place that should be safe and affirming—schools. As demonstrated in Leon’s story, educators and institutions must confront, dismantle, and rewrite the dominant narrative about Black boys.

From preschool to college, a prevailing national narrative contends that Black boys and young men are difficult to teach, deviant, undisciplined, unintelligent, and problematic. Consistent with deficit-based narratives, Black boys are often associated with negative traits such as lazy, disengaged, nonattentive, lacking focus and motivation, disruptive, confrontational, and threatening. Conversely, Black boys are not often considered thoughtful, analytical, creative, determined, smart, collaborative, respectful, and hard-working.

### ■ ■ Engaging the Mind ★ Taking Action ★ Inspiring Excellence Gauging and Changing Your Institutional Narrative

To gauge a school’s current institutional narrative about Black boys, educators and administrators should engage in an analytical and reflective exercise to assess the prevailing culture and climate and to reveal implicit/explicit bias and marginalizing teacher expectations and perspectives. In small cross-functional

institutional teams, conversations might discuss the following questions:

- What is the primary institutional narrative about Black boys? What stories are shared and perpetuated about and involving Black boys in this institution?

*(Continued)*



(Continued)

- Who promotes and reifies the educational narrative about Black boys?
  - What is the most common lens by which Black boys are viewed at the institution—asset or deficit? Do teachers and others talk about their brilliance or focus on their brawn?
  - Institutionally, is the school's ethos the same for Black boys as it is for all other students? If not, why?
  - Are Black boys regularly regarded as intellectual exemplars? Are Black boys asked about their academic interests?
  - How do teachers and others affirm Black boys' experiences, culture, history, and community in curricular and pedagogical strategies?
- Are Black boys at the forefront and center of academic objectives, curricula, and pedagogy?
  - Are Black boys academically and personally succeeding at your institution? If so, is it because of or despite your institutional practices, beliefs, values, and culture?
  - Do Black boys see positive reflections of themselves in the faculty, curricula, and administrators?
  - How does the institution *operationalize* equity and inclusion efforts, specifically related to Black boys?

These queries allow institutions to honestly and transparently reflect on their perceptions, pedagogy, and behaviors related to Black boys.

To confront and dismantle historically marginalizing, deficit narratives, schools must courageously conduct an in-depth strategic analysis of their institutional practices, communication, and outcomes to determine their inclusivity and overall academic effectiveness related to the educational and personal success of Black boys. Questions can include:

- Are Black boys embodied in the institutional vision, mission, and ethos?

This analysis should inform and guide an honest, transparent, and sustainable institutional strategic plan involving stakeholders across and throughout all levels of the institution to ensure collective buy-in and accountability. Additional strategies include:

1. Confront and dismantle the historical narrative about Black boys and advance an asset narrative that values and leverages their diverse personal, cultural, and intellectual attributes.
2. Evaluate and change institutional systems, practices, and policies that reify the dominant narrative surrounding Black boys.
3. Adopt a racial equity strategy to determine the impact of a deficit narrative on the educational experiences, outcomes, and success of Black boys, while

ensuring transparency, honesty, and accountability.

4. Champion and include the authentic and diverse voices of Black boys to construct a realistic and inclusive narrative that positions them as valued members of the community.
5. Acknowledge the emotional and educational trauma experienced by Black boys when they are subjected to an institution and teachers who engage with them through a deficit lens.

While these efforts are complex and require sustained focus, schools must develop a fierce urgency to confront, dismantle, and rewrite an affirming and authentic narrative of Black boys. Educators and institutions must ensure the personal, social, and academic success of Black boys because their dignity as well as emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being is literally at stake.

*The narrative about Black boys is deep and pervasive, and rooted in many people. Psychologists suggest dealing with stereotypes and false narratives like weeds. To grow a successful garden, you must recognize the weeds, pull them out, and then replace them with healthy flowers, fruits, and vegetables. We hope that the preceding chapters have helped you, as readers, to begin to recognize this narrative in your own thoughts and explanations and that the remaining chapters will help you find the seeds of counternarratives, accurate images, and positive visions of Black boys that will grow and flourish in your mind and heart over the next many years.*