

Introduction

Welcome to *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*

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Welcome to *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*. Some readers may be wondering where in the world this title comes from and what this book can do for you. Others may be wondering if there really is a difference between teaching Black boys and teaching White boys. Or girls, for that matter. There may be a question about the use of the term *boys* instead of *males* or *men*. Some readers may feel attacked. To teachers, the title may suggest they need a guide to do what they already do. We will answer all of these questions in turn because each question, concern, or trepidation that arises as you read this book will be critical to furthering and engaging in the conversation about White teachers and Black boys that usually goes unmentioned.

Teachers, like students, enter the classroom every September with hope for positive outcomes, but despite good intentions, the statistics hold that Black boys are underperforming in K–12 schools in the United States. *The Guide* does not set out to blame White women or Black boys for the current state of education. It instead takes a look at the reality of our current educational system. We believe that with the right tools, many teachers will be able to build classrooms and schools that recognize and honor the brilliance of Black boys, their potential for excellence, and their capacity to produce and create. We have witnessed eager, fierce, and courageous teachers who are ready to work toward this vision. But we can't change the direction of the structure if we don't understand the reality. We want to paint the

truth about the current state of White women and Black boys in education and to offer new ways of seeing, hearing, and understanding those statistics. We want to offer new ways to move forward.

THE TRUTH ABOUT BLACK BOYS AND WHITE WOMEN . . . IN STATISTICS

The following few paragraphs tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth (so help us!) about what is currently going on with White women and Black boys in education.

White women comprise a majority of the public-school teaching workforce, while Black males are one of the lowest demographic groups in academic achievement across a number of important learning and developmental metrics. White teachers (of all gender identities) comprise 82.7 percent of teachers in all public schools; 70 percent of teachers at all charter schools; 79.2 percent of teachers in schools with over 1,000 students; and 63 percent of teachers at schools in which at least 75 percent of students are approved for free or reduced lunch (Goldring, Gray, & Bitterman, 2013). In addition, women (of all racial backgrounds) comprise approximately 74 percent of all public-school educators (e.g., school leaders, teachers, education practitioners), and comprise 76.1 percent of the public-school teaching workforce in all public schools (Goldring et al., 2013). Very few reports filter for “White women” as a category, but estimates suggest that 62 percent of all U.S. educators are White women (Toldson, 2012).

The inequalities Black boys experience in educational environments manifest themselves very early and, if unaddressed, are compounded during middle school and secondary school experiences. Negative perceptions of Black boys begin as early as kindergarten, and their behaviors are often “adultified” during later stages of childhood (i.e., “their transgressions are made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naivete”) (Ferguson, 2000, p. 83). These constructions often lead to the maintenance of classroom and campus management practices that have harmful effects on Black boys. Very rarely do teachers engage in professional development activities that focus on the racialized aspects of their students’ experiences—and the impact on their academic identity and performance.

While disparities in academic achievement along racial and ethnic lines have narrowed since the early 1970s, significant discrepancies remain at all grade levels and in all subject areas. For example, at all testing levels, Black boys are predicted to score among the lowest on both reading and math portions of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (Kena et al., 2015). Moreover, Black boys continue to be

largely underrepresented in gifted programs or honors and advanced placement courses (Schott Foundation, 2010). Finally, Black boys remain among the least likely to graduate from high school within four years. In some urban public school districts, for example, four-year graduation rates for Black boys remain between 25 and 45 percent (Schott Foundation, 2010).

Even as we present these statistics, we want to provide a reminder of what statistics are. They are a mathematical picture of a system. They do not describe any one person or any one school. For all the negative statistics we have about Black boys, we also know that there are almost two million (1,909,900) Black men in the United States who hold a four-year college degree (The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education (JBHE), 2017). And while that rate of college attainment for Black men is lower than any other demographic, that number of Black men college graduates is much higher than the popular media suggest. It is also greater than the number of Black men in prison, which is not obvious from most public depictions of Black men. We know that 409,000 Black men have master's degrees, and 71,000 Black men have PhDs (JBHE, 2017). We also know countless Black men whose lives straddled the statistics, such as Dr. Frederick Bryant,¹ co-founder of the Race Institute for K–12 Educators, who dropped out of high school at sixteen and went on to get his GED and later, a BS, MA, and a PhD in group dynamics.

We hope to reframe a fundamental assumption about the statistics on Black boys: these statistics are not about the failure of Black boys. But neither are these statistics about the failure of White women teachers. These statistics are indicators of the success and failure of an education system in which White women teachers, many of whom may have very little exposure to Black people outside of school, are responsible for the education of a population of children they have never been taught to teach. We have been producing these statistics for years and giving teachers the same tools to try to turn them around. With this guide, we offer something different.

The data on school discipline also support the need for a deeper understanding of the relationships between Black boys and their educators. Black boys are placed in special education, suspended, and expelled in higher numbers than their same-gender White and Latino peers. According to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2014; based on survey year 2011–2012), Black boys were 15.8 percent of the total public school male enrollment,² but represented 35.4 percent

¹ Before his untimely death in 2016, Frederick Bryant acted as a thought partner and member of the support team for this book.

² Public school male students overall and by race/ethnicity, students with disabilities served under IDEA and those served solely under Section 504, and students who are English language learners, by state: School Year 2011–12. For more information, visit www.ocrdata.ed.gov.

of all boys receiving one or more out-of-school suspension.³ Furthermore, Black boys have the highest rate of placement in juvenile or residential facilities (733 for every 100,000 students), much higher than their same-race female counterparts (101/100,000) and same-gender, racial counterparts (White males, 153/100,000 and Latino males, 312/100,000, Kena et al, 2015). Taken together, these trends provide clear reminders of the urgent need for inquiry and interventions to examine the factors and interactions shaping Black male educational experiences.

One unique aspect of this book is the video links provided in the book via QR Codes, which will take you to interviews we conducted with Black males and White women teachers about their experiences of the White woman teacher-Black boy student relationship. Among both groups we interviewed, the most critical issue seemed to be fear. Both Black men and White women have fears: fear of each other, fear of one another's communities, fear of opportunities, fear of a lack of opportunities, and a fear of understanding. Fear. On both sides, it's not excitement, not anticipation, but fear. What an uncomfortable common ground on which to begin a relationship. Some teachers deny this. They say, "I'm not afraid of *my* Black students. But if I see a Black teen in the streets and his pants are sagging and his hat's on backward, then I'm going to be afraid." We believe White fear is killing Black men in this country, and it is this same fear that's failing Black boys in the classroom. It is this very fear we want to address. As Derrick Swanigan said in our interviews, "If you are afraid of my community, you are afraid of me."

The Guide did not evolve because we thought White women were bad people or bad teachers. *The Guide* arose because we realize that many White people struggle to understand race and the impact it has on the lives of students of color. Racial competence is not taught in most White families or in schools of education. Dr. Howard Stevenson, a professor of psychology at Penn's Graduate School of Education, suggests that racial stress—such as the kind that people encounter when they think about the role of race or racism in their teaching relationships—is not a matter of character, as it is so often made out to be. It's not about what kind of person you are. Rather, says Stevenson, it is a matter of competence (personal communication, 2013). In other words, if conversations about race—or even books about race—stress you out, that is not a sign you are racist. It is a sign you may lack the skills and competencies to engage in the conversation. It means you need to acquire a skill set you do not currently have—but it is one you can gain. In fact, it is one all educators must have. The corollary to this idea is that a teacher may be a very good person and still lack

³Number and percentage of public school male students with and without disabilities receiving one or more out-of-school suspension by race/ethnicity, by state: School Year 2011–12. For more information visit www.ocrdata.ed.gov.

racial competence. Being a good person is an important starting point—in fact, we assume most teachers are good people who want the best for their students—but being a good person does not mean one automatically has the skills of racial competence. Stevenson explains this another way: “If you are becoming a nurse and you’re afraid to give an injection, that’s okay. Fear is a normal human emotion. But if you don’t acquire the skill to get over your fear, if you don’t learn to give an injection, you can’t become a nurse” (personal communication, 2013). Similarly, if you are a teacher who lacks racial competence, a teacher who is afraid of talking about race, or who is afraid of Black communities, that is okay; fear is a normal human emotion. And these are skills you can learn. But getting over that fear, and learning about race, are prerequisites for effective teaching of Black boys.

The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys was written with the belief that these fears can be overcome and that our educational system can be transformed if educators are engaged in active personal and professional reflection on systemic issues, from teacher training to classroom practices to materials that privilege White students and inherently biased assessments. Working together is the only way to create change within a system built on the historical ideology that White is right and Black is wrong. This work is imperative if we are going to change outcomes for Black boys.

Another unique aspect of the guide is that it requires the reader to work through activities that may challenge them. We ask you to honestly reflect on who you are, where you come from, and what your role is in perpetuating a society that privileges White people, White ways of knowing, and White ways of “doing school.” We ask teachers to consider their role in perpetuating an educational system designed around the educational needs of White people, a system that was designed to keep Black boys out. *The Guide* provides White teachers opportunities for personal growth as educators and for development of skills that support the academic achievement of their Black boy students. In a unique combination of both personal and professional introspective work, *The Guide* takes readers through academic work by experts, stories by educators and students, and videos that will help personalize the educational lives of Black boys.

If we can do this, if we can fix education so that Black boys show up at schools in the wholeness of their selves, so that Black boys feel a sense of belonging, nurturance, challenge, and love at school, so that Black boys grow up to live full lives with meaningful work and a sound educational foundation, it will be because White women made it happen. If we don’t, it will be because White women didn’t make it happen. Either way, White women are in the driver’s seat in the classroom in America. We don’t have an option here. White women have to do this work.

“WHY DO YOU NEED A GUIDE TO TEACHING BLACK BOYS? CAN’T YOU JUST LOVE THEM?”

This question was asked in the very first workshop conducted with this guide. It gave the room and the presenters pause—why *do* we need a guide to teaching Black boys? What is so different about teaching Black boys that a teacher can’t just do the same thing she does with other students? Why is loving African American children any different from loving all children, and isn’t loving enough? The question asked was grounded in the idea that successful teachers simply must love their students and the rest will follow. As we struggled with this question, we came to two answers.

First, loving Black boys is not a straightforward enterprise. As a group, Black boys and men are stereotyped to be dangerous, lazy, dishonest, violent, athletic, and unintelligent (Harper, 2015). The images of Blackness are so distorted that very few people who grow up in U.S. society—including Black boys themselves—can simply love them without first dealing with the stereotypes, the misinformation, and the lies we have been taught about Black boys.

Second, we had to ask ourselves: Is “loving” one’s students even the goal? Isn’t the goal academic achievement, access to an equal education, closing of the opportunity gap? Isn’t giving Black boys the tools they need to participate equally in society the best form of “loving” a teacher can give?

If academic achievement is the end goal, educators need to examine current educational systems, which too often evaluate performance based on the degree of assimilation to White ways of being, as opposed to valuing individual differences, strengths, and possibilities. We need to recognize that the current assimilationist model is a *privilege system*, built by and for the success of mainstream middle-class White people without consideration for the needs and circumstances of people of color and the working poor.

WHY DO WE WRITE ONLY ABOUT WHITE WOMEN AND BLACK BOYS?

One of the principles of universal design (Burgstahler, 2015) is that when you design for a small subpopulation, the specificity and practicality of that design often scales up to more effective practices for the general population as well. Gender scholars find this with teaching methods that are effective for boys. In searching for ways to better serve boys who were restless and seemingly uncooperative in school in comparison to their more compliant girl counterparts, teachers and researchers developed active learning strategies to accommodate learning

needs of boys. But when these strategies are implemented, teachers tend to find that they are more effective for girls as well (Kimmel, 2000) The girls' previous compliance suggested that the old strategies were working for them, when actually, girls also learn better when they are actively engaged. This would never have been discovered, however, if we did not isolate the one gender demographic for whom education was not working.

When we look at the problems we have with race and education in the United States, we believe we will get closer to finding a solution if we can do two things in our analysis. The first, based on this principle of universal design, is to look specifically at the different issues that affect one particular subgroup. While what we learn won't necessarily be generalizable to Asian American, Latino, American Indian, White, or even Black girl students, the awareness that readers take away about the impact of racialization, our racially inequitable history, a racially segregated school system, and the predominance of Whiteness in education may help readers think differently about those subgroups as well. The second is to look critically at Whiteness. So often, when we write or talk about race in education, the discussion focuses squarely on the outcomes of students of color. But when we step back to see that most of our teachers are White, most administrators are White, most educational policymakers are White, most curriculum writers are White, and most teacher educators are White—then we get a much clearer picture of race in education. If we want to know about race and education in the United States, we will get closer to a deep and nuanced understanding if we look closely at White women teachers and one particular subgroup of students of color. Hence, *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys*.

Why do we write about *Black boys*, rather than *Black men* or *Black males*? We have heard this question a lot, and we acknowledge that the term doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. We acknowledge the problematic history of calling Black men "boys," a practice that has been used to denigrate and humiliate Black men who were fathers and grandfathers. But we write about boys because we want to emphasize that children who are 18 and younger are still children. They are not men. The police treat them like men. The courts treat them like men. Many adults fear them like adult men. Teachers often expect them to have skills of code switching and racial border crossing that most adults do not have. We want to remind ourselves and others that Blacks boys in K–12 educational spaces are boys—not men. But why not use the term *males*? We chose not to use the term *Black males* because it is most regularly used in the media and in social science in ways that turn individual children into a clinical, statistical category, which can be dehumanizing and minimizing. We are talking about children, from preschool to twelfth grade. They are still young, they still need our guidance and our support, and they need us to be the adults so that they can do the growing and learning that they need to do.

In addressing the experiences of Black boys, we have tried to represent them in the diverse complexity of their intersectional identities. While the population of Black boys in our K–12 schools is infinitely diverse—and we cannot possibly cover all the different combinations of identities here—we have tried not to portray Black boys as a monolith. In this book, you will hear stories of Black boys who are deaf, gay, trans, hetero, wealthy, poor, and cis. You will hear from Black men who are opera lovers, filmmakers, football coaches, world travelers, school superintendents, professors, and teachers.

What about Black girls? Black girl students face many of the same issues that Black boys face: a curriculum and book selection that doesn't reflect their reality, implicit bias on the part of teachers and others, a racialized history that limited their (and their ancestors') access to resources, jobs, and education. But Black girls—and the issues they face in education—are also unique in important ways. At the end of the book, we have an “outtro” written by womanist scholar Charlotte Jacobs, PhD, in which she explains some of the ways the lessons of this book could be applied to the education of Black girls, as well as the valuable ways that the issues that impact Black girls are different from those that impact Black boys.

OUR CONCEPT AND GOALS

From its earliest conception, this book has been oriented toward an audience of White women teachers. Every chapter, as you will see, addresses White women teachers, and all our ideas are built around the particular relationship between White women teachers and Black boy students. But as we have promoted the book around the country, we found ourselves realizing that many people besides White women want to use this as a resource. And as the book has come to completion, we have realized that these resources could be useful to many different types of readers. In developing a project that has a specific mission—White women, Black boys—we have created something that will likely be applicable for all. We hope that, whatever your race or gender identity, this book has value for you in your life and work. Whenever possible, we try to address the reader as “readers”, rather than as “White women.” The exception to this is within the individual chapters, some of which are written directly to White women teachers.

This book includes chapters by authors with a wide variety of experiences. Some are teachers, some are parents, some are educational experts, administrators, and teacher educators. Some authors approach their writing from personal experience, and others base their chapters on research—their own and others'. The authors are Black, White, Latino, biracial and multiracial, transgender and cisgender, women and men, gay and straight. The more than forty chapters that comprise this book

present a broad array of voices and approaches to this topic that are deeply personal, as well as institutional and systemic.

You may notice an inconsistency in the approach that authors take to capitalizing the terms “Black” and “White” and “People of Color.” As an editorial team, we prefer to let individual authors choose the system of capitalization that works for them, in spite of the inconsistency that creates in the book as a whole. There are many different considerations to make when deciding whether and when to capitalize. We capitalize “Black” and “White” in the introduction and in the passages between chapters to emphasize that these are not literal colors, but figurative, constructed, social and racial categories that are also political, sometimes legislated categories. We use the term *Black* rather than *African American* to be inclusive of our African immigrant and Caribbean students who do not identify as African American, even as we realize that issues of race and racism may affect them differently from their African American counterparts.

We use the term *White* rather than *Caucasian* because it is more accurately descriptive of European-descended, light-skinned people in the United States. The term *Caucasian* may feel to many like a more politically correct expression of Whiteness, but it is both geographically inaccurate and historically uncommon. Many of the laws that privileged Whiteness throughout U.S. history referred to “White people” (Lopez, 2006); it is not a new term.

Finally, we use the terms *Black* and *White* because these are salient racial categories today and have been throughout history. As the pages of this book can attest, they have significant consequences and ramifications for the lives of people who are labeled Black or White and who have family and ancestors who were labeled Black or White. These racial categories are not biological. They are socially constructed categories. Having brown skin or having peachy skin is biological, often inherited from birth parents and shared with siblings, although not always. But the meaning we give to that skin color (the access, the privileges, the resources, the right to vote or restriction against voting, the union membership or exclusion, for example)—the meaning of what you can get or cannot get because of that skin color—all of that is socially constructed. Race is based on biological features, but race is a fiction that we tell ourselves to convince ourselves that we are more different than we really are. And yet, the fact that race is a fiction does not mean that we don’t have to deal with it. It has real and powerful consequences for our lives.

Throughout the book, when we refer to ourselves as “we,” we are writing as a multiracial, crossgender writing team: Eddie Moore, Jr., Ali Michael, and Marguerite W. Penick-Parks. Except for chapters and vignettes that are attributed to specific authors, we are the writing and editorial team responsible for all the content in this book.

THE FRAMEWORK

In 1996, co-editor Eddie Moore, Jr., founded the national White Privilege Conference based on the idea that “equity and justice through self and social transformation” are the hallmarks of change. *The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys* is grounded in the same conceptual framework as the White Privilege Conference: **Understanding, Respecting, and Connecting**. These three key actions guide the work: Through **Understanding** self and students, **Respecting** individuality and differences, and **Connecting** through the mutual goal of a quality education, White women and Black boys can come together for academic excellence, academic achievement, and personal and professional growth. This guide will help readers move beyond fear to understanding, respecting, and connecting.

UNDERSTANDING

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING SELF—THE GUIDE TO BEING A WHITE WOMAN WHO TEACHES BLACK BOYS

The Guide for White Women Who Teach Black Boys is not solely a guide to understanding Black boys. It is as much—if not more so—a guide to understanding what it means to be a White woman. This guide aims to help White women teachers better understand the racialized, historical, and political relationship between White women and Black boys, to be conscious of the raced and gendered aspects of their relationships with Black boy students, as well as the raced and gendered aspects of their own experiences and those of the Black boys they teach. This section supports White women teachers, some of whom may never have thought about themselves as White before, to understand the ways they have been positioned in terms of race and gender—even without their knowledge or consent. Because many Black boys go through K–12 education without ever having teachers who are not White women, White women must have an understanding of self as well as an understanding of the experiences of Black boys in their classrooms.

PART 2: UNDERSTANDING THE CONSTRAINTS AND CHALLENGING THE NARRATIVES ABOUT WHO BLACK BOYS ARE AND WHO WHITE WOMEN CAN BE

Part 2 is about the narratives and common tropes that play almost as big a role in the relationship between White women and Black boys as the individual actors themselves. These narratives come from the media and then get perpetuated in teacher lounge conversations and in individual personal fears. They teach us to see Black boys as athletes and musicians at best, but not as scholars, scientists, mathematicians, and creative writers. These chapters will address those common tropes

and demonstrate ways these rote narratives constrict the possibilities of authentic connection. White women will be encouraged to wrestle with the question that one Black man asked in our interviews, “Why are people afraid of us?” and to strategize ways to challenge these common narratives and tropes on multiple levels: in society at large, while consuming media, when you find them in your head, when you hear them in your school, and when you see your students have internalized them.

RESPECTING

PART 3: RESPECTING THE BROAD DIVERSITY OF BLACK BOYS’ EXPERIENCES AND IDENTITIES

Part 3 addresses issues that are specific to Black boys, either because they are Black or because they are boys, or both. This section illustrates the broad heterogeneity of Black boys, even as we focus on Black boys as a group that has particular needs and a different social positioning than their Asian, Latino, Native American, multi-racial, and White male peers, as well as their female peers of all racial backgrounds.

PART 4: RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS, COLLEAGUES, AND COMMUNITY

Part 4 addresses the need to build relationships between White women teachers and Black boys and their families, as well as strategies for doing so. It emphasizes the importance of teachers working together with families and communities to create structures of safety and support to hold onto Black boys as they grow up in a society that so greatly misunderstands them. This section includes chapters on giving feedback to and receiving feedback from Black students and their families, as well as a larger section on relationships with families. It also discusses how teachers can teach to the *boy* in their boys, which means not holding them to behavioral expectations normed on girl students.

CONNECTING

PART 5: CONNECTING STUDENT FAILURE TO SCHOOL STRUCTURES AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Parts 5 and 6 are about the ways that both school success and school failure are mutually constructed by teachers and students in interaction with school and state policies. It is meant to examine the ways in which teacher actions shape student responses. The goal is to examine the context in which misbehavior and failure occur in order to help teachers understand the ways in which student failure is often a consequence of a group dynamic, rather than an individual failing. This

section examines how power struggles between teachers and students play out, why teachers need to be the responsible adult who takes the lead in de-escalating such struggles, and strategies for doing so.

PART 6: CONNECTING STUDENT SUCCESS TO SCHOOL STRUCTURES AND CLASSROOM STRATEGIES

Part 6 is the toolbox for teachers. It is a compilation of chapters written by visionary educators, who have designed and implemented programming that works for Black boys. While strategies and tools have been distributed throughout the book, this part focuses almost exclusively on actions that teachers can take in their classrooms to improve outcomes for Black boys.

If you are doing this work well, these are some of the outcomes you can expect to see:

- An increased awareness of yourself and of the ways that your race and gender impact you and your relationships
- A new lens for seeing Black boys more clearly as a group, and as individuals
- A capacity to understand specific issues that Black boys and their families might contend with
- Better relationships between you and your Black boy students, including more open communication
- Better communication with the families of the Black boys in your class
- Better relationships between the Black boys in your class and the students of other races
- Higher levels of engagement from the Black boys in your class
- Higher levels of achievement from the Black boys in your class

CONCLUSION

Schools that fail Black boys are not extraordinary. In fact, schools that fail Black boys are, in essence, doing what they were built to do. Schools in the United States were built by White people for the advancement and education of White people. For Black people in the United States, getting an education has historically been an illicit activity rife with danger, personal risk, and structural barriers. When schools fail Black boys, it's because they are *doing school* the way that school has always been done. It may be the only way schools know how. And yet, if we want to shift outcomes for Black boys, we need to create different ways to *do school* that acknowledge this history and that work for the vast majority of Black boys. *That* would be extraordinary.