

# Getting To The Core; April Recording

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Education, literacy, identity development, Kendrick Lamar, cultural heritage, student engagement, teacher authenticity, counter narrative, student liberation, writing instruction, parental support, mentoring, educational resources, social support, and empathy.

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Terrance Scott, Vonetta Clark-Tooles, Dr. Carla Postell, Dr. Aaron Johnson

### **Vonetta Clark-Tooles** 00:13

Good afternoon, good afternoon and welcome to Getting to the Core. This is a Wayne RESA podcast, where we talk with educators, politicians, other professionals, parents, stakeholders, all those invested in education and the educational walk as we strive to better educate all people today, we are so fortunate to have the Esteem Dr. Aaron Johnson, a native Detroit. Director and Chief Consultant at Archetype Consulting. Dr Johnson is a published author of "A Walk in their Kicks: Literacy, Identity and Schooling of Young Black Males." In addition to being an author, Dr. Johnson is a scholar, a writer, researcher and professor at Wayne State University. He uses his voice and his pen to improve learning outcomes, not specifically for black males, but for all people in general. Welcome Dr Johnson, so happy to have you on getting to the core.

### **Dr. Aaron Johnson** 01:21

Thank you. Thank you. I am so honored to be here. Thanks for just inviting me into the space and talking about the things that we're most passionate about.

### **Vonetta Clark-Tooles** 01:30

Indeed, indeed. So typically, we kind of pass the bucket as to who gets to ask the questions first. And so since I'm sitting in for our fearless leader, Marvin Franklin, I'm going to kick this off with the first question. So you have a newsletter through your consulting media, and you have a number of articles that are available for your listeners. I want to talk about, right off the bat one of my favorite ones, which is... what can schools learn from Kendrick Lamar? And if you don't know who Kendrick Lamar is, he is only the most Googled Super Bowl Halftime Show in all of history, people, the most. And so in a genius performance in the very recent winter of 2025 what is it that we can learn from Kendrick?

### **Dr. Aaron Johnson** 02:37

Well, I think he taught us a bunch of different lessons. One to be unapologetically who you are, to not perform. You know, we all have an audience of who we talk to or who we speak to. Kendrick Lamar, and I'm a huge fan of Kendrick Lamar. Spoke to his core audience. I saw him be authentically himself.

He did not put on the mask that we often have to put on when we go into spaces, whether it be our jobs or whether it be with our friends or family, whether just be in public. He really did a performance that was connected to his cultural past, the cultural past of black people. He really honored what I would call the counter narrative. He presented a counter narrative to America about who he was, who his people were, where our history was in that, in that genius performance of like 13 minutes. I don't know how he crammed all of that in 13 minutes, but he was able to do that. And so what I think schools can do, and I don't know if you've been asked this question, but what I think schools can do is to help students to learn how to do that. They often have to put on masks when they walk into school spaces. They often are asked to shift from hour to hour, how they respond to the adults, how they respond to their peers, how they, make themselves amenable to school environments that don't always honor their identities. And so we can teach that to students through writing. We can teach it through conversations. We can teach it through accessing what their goals are for their own futures. And I think Kendrick Lamar masterfully showed us how to do that, and we can take some lessons from that and incorporate it in our daily lessons and content that we already are using with students.

**Vonetta Clark-Toolles 04:42**

So that is the question I was asking. Thank you for answering it so eloquently. And so my follow up to that is, what will it take for teachers to be able to do that? Because many teachers are wearing the mask themselves. So what will it take for teachers to be able to facilitate that kind of. Authentic transparency of self for students,

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 05:05**

That's great question. I think teachers have to understand who they are, and they have to understand what masks they put on when they walk into some of these school spaces, particularly people of color, who we know are often maybe even asked outright or asked subtly to be different than who they are. So teachers have to understand who they are, what they what their cultural backgrounds are, what their what their likes and dreams and hopes and wishes are. You we can't teach students how to do those things. We don't even know how to do them for ourselves and so, and it's okay. You know, I would often run into some educators, particularly white educators. One woman last week, she apologized for being white. I said, what, you don't have to apologize for being white, you don't have to apologize for your own culture. What you have to do is you have to understand it, and you have to understand the history, and then you help students to take off masks. In other ways, by listening to them, by honoring their voices, by encouraging them to disagree, you know, with either instruction or content or even the mores of the classroom. And so when I think teachers are able to honor their own identities, they can transfer that learning that they that they engaged in over time to help our students to do the same.

**Vonetta Clark-Toolles 06:39**

That's beautiful. Dr. Postell, you ready?

**Dr. Carla Postell 06:45**

Yes, I am all right. Let's go. You have kind of hit on some of those things. And I was going to shift a little bit to your book, if that's okay. It's still connected, because some of those things that you just spoke about, as far as the teachers realizing their own identity and what they need to bring into the classroom. I wanted to have you think about or share with us in your book "A Walk in your Kicks," you kind of talk

about how literacy and schooling experiences impact the identity development of the young black male. Yes, what moments are like? Stories from your research, your work, your experience, you know, illustrate to you the biggest disconnect between schools and the reality of the lives that our students live.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 07:34

Love that question, too... One of my favorite stories is when I was in, I won't say which school district, but I was in the school district and the area, and I'm walking through the hallway, and I, you know, at this point in time, I was just, I was at a meeting at this particular School, and I'm walking through the hallway, and it's a predominantly white school, and a group of black students stopped me, and they said, Hey, who are you the new football coach? And I said, No, I gave them my position, and they said, that's what's up. We need more. We need to see more black men in these types of positions. And so a teacher heard overheard this, and started correcting his grammar. And so afterwards, he went and turn to his friend, he said, Man, I can't even be black in the hallway. And so for me, what that meant was this, we you've already—this, this is what I interpret. This interpreted this student as saying—you've already told me that the school enterprise within the classroom isn't for me. I can't be who I am. I can't lean into my black identity in school spaces for whatever various reasons. I didn't have this conversation with this young man, but for whatever various reasons. But at least there are some spaces in the school where I should be able to be myself, and I perceive that the hallway was one of those spaces. Now you're telling me that I can't even be myself in the hallway when I'm talking to my friends or when I'm talking to other people when I'm not engaged in these academic identities. And so I highlight that in the book, and the title of the chapter is, you mean, I can't even be black in the hallway. So that that resonated with me, and this happened probably about, I will say, about 10 years ago that resonated with me. And I want to, I want to link that, that story, that question, to the question that Mrs. Clark-Toolles just asked about how teachers can dig into that a little bit, not only by understanding their own identities, by using the instructional strategies that we already know how to do, to some degree, to help students dig into their own identities. How can we use writing as a tool for doing a course this summer called using writing instruction as a tool for student liberation? How can we use writing instruction to help students dig into their own identities? How can we, you know, put books and texts and other media in front of them that shows them the cultural heritage, that from which they come and that they bring? You know, Luis C. Moll wrote some time ago this, this piece, a brilliant piece called "Funds of Knowledge." How can we access those students Funds of Knowledge, things that they already know how to do, things that they're already brilliant at, things that they already you know are good at, and utilize those skills that they already know how to engage in in the classroom, whether it be writing or poetry or, you know, it could be, you know, being creative in some other way. We have a captive audience for at the very least, you know a semester and at the most 13 years. You have a captive audience of students that we can help them dig into those identities so that they can use the things that they already know how to do or that they are passionate about to to connect to school spaces. And that was one more thing I'll say about that, and now I'll I'll be quiet, at least for a moment. That part of what was the impetus of this book was that my son asked at nine years old... Why don't teachers find out what we like and then just teach us that? And I was I was floored at nine one that he was thinking along those lines. And then the second part of that is I didn't know how to answer his question. Why don't he saw this disconnect between himself and what he was interested in and what he was being taught in schools? So going back to your question, Dr. Postell, that story, for me,

resonated so deeply because our black students identities are often devalued, uh, pushed away. Uh, got connected to the content, not connected to the instruction, in ways that they see value in school. So they do it as a sort of like a rote process, rather than seeing, in many cases, how it can add to their futures.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles 12:48**

...That was beautiful, but that that's the chasm, right? That's the chasm in education, is that there's a gap between what we value and what students value, and the gap is so large that there's no connection in schools. It really has become an us against them. We're no longer community. So thank you. That was a beautiful answer to that question. Dr, Scott, I'm wondering what you're thinking.

**Dr. Terrance Scott 13:18**

A lot. I got so many thoughts over here. I'm just sitting here simmer, waiting on my chance to jump in. Dr Johnson, your genius is cannot be cannot be understated. So thank you very much for being here, for sharing. I want to bridge it to the first two questions together, sitting here thinking about Kendrick being a black boy growing up, he isn't, but a couple years older than me, so just growing up as a black boy in the 90s and early 2000s and being in schools and trying to just find our way, and having art as a means of expression, have a having art as a means of Like, freedom and like, I can create worlds. I can be wherever I want, I can say whatever I want, I can do whatever I want. And it's just I'm free to be myself in this moment and having schools essentially being places where that should be cultivated, uh, but instead, we've seen it be hindered. We've seen, we see lights get dimmed in school. We see things get discouraged in schools. We've been talking amongst ourselves quite a bit lately about how it feels on purpose. It feels like this is like this is people talk about how schools are broken. No, I think they're working exactly how they're supposed to work. And so thinking about that, with that in mind, with what you shared about Kendrick, with art itself. In your book, you talk about freedom, and the connection between books and freedom, with the current landscape being one that is anti book. We got banned books and book burnings and all kinds of stuff. You know, anti education. We got the whole attack on the Department of Education thing happening, even how funding is targeted against higher education right now. You got institutions trying to figure out where they are, right, what do you think we can do to, like, win young people over. How do we like, you gotta go to school every day because you got to. But like, with all it is in mind, how do we make folks intrinsically motivated to actually want to be like in school, and that, to cultivate the idea that like, knowledge is power and literacy is freedom and all of those things.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 15:39**

Yes, oh, wow. There's a bunch of things we can do, but the thing that surfaces right away is talk to them. Have conversations with students. Understand, going back to my son's question, why don't people just figure out what we like and just do that? It was just that simple for him, but you have to, you have to talk to them, you have to genuinely listen. Part of the work that I do is I go and do focus groups of students, and I just let them talk. I ask them about their hopes and wishes and dreams for school. They're not disconnected from the idea of school and the idea of learning, their disconnected from the institution that we currently run, right? They see the value in learning. They want to learn. They see what's possible for them if they were only given access to it while they, while it's, something that's still within their grasp. Because once they leave us, you know, unfortunately, they're on, they're on their

own to some degree. They, you know, they're not required any longer. You don't have your parents shaking you, waking you know, saying it's time to go to school. You don't, you don't have people saying you got to go read, you know, A Tale of Two Cities, or whatever the case may be. Like, you don't have people doing that. And so, so I'd say first and foremost, that's talk to them. We have to let go of the of the power, so to speak, to a certain degree. Yes, we have standards that we have to meet. Yes, we have to make sure that we are, you know, assessing them in ways that we're required to assess them by the state. But we sometimes we put limitations on ourselves that the state or the Feds don't really put on us. And so as a teacher in the classroom, I never asked for permission, like I did what was in the best interest of those students. And I knew because I asked them the question. I asked them, what would they like to learn about. I asked them what, how would they like to engage? What would you like to do? One of the things that we did, we did a poetry slam on Fridays. And so we would read the poetry of all of these different poets from the so called canon and the black canon. And then we would engage in the theme like, I'm an avid hip hop fan, and Mos Def said this once. He said, people were people are trying to get me to do these albums. But if you, if you are a real fan of hip hop, you're going to try to engage in it at some point in time. If you're a real musician, you're going to actually pick up an instrument at some point in time and try to play it. So we're asking these students to be writers and readers and poets and all of those things. We have to give them the opportunities to be able to do that. And it's so aligned to what the state standards say about reading and writing and all of those things. And you know, social studies standards about our history, the students are so brilliant, we have to open up the doors allow them to access that and show that brilliance on a daily basis. Dr. Scott, I'm not sure if I answered your question or not, but getting going.

**Dr. Terrance Scott 19:10**

I really do appreciate that. Just a quick follow up, I think, first of all, I'm a avid hip hop fan and also spoken word pull up myself. So I definitely love and have done similar things in my classroom too. I'm thinking about the mindset that it takes for educators to be liberated and to get to this place you spoke about. You spoke briefly about how we you actually wrote it down. It was, I felt a beautiful gym. You probably don't even realize you said it. He said, we put our own limitations on kids because we struggle to reimagine education, like thinking about that. How do we get out of our own way? We talk about, like, cultivating, this, this, this brilliance and like, being like. Having to see ourselves. But there are so many educators out there that are burnt out. They're tired... We got leaders who are like, please just, first of all, just show up to work. Show up to work on time, having warm bodies in the classroom, right? Once everybody is in the class, key, teach the kids something, please. Can you do your job? And so we got people just trying to get through the day, and there's so much of that just trying to just get through the day. And so I want to just try to transcend that and make school a joyful, fun place where people can actually want to be where adults want to be, not just kids, adults too. They want to be there too. Any thoughts on that as a follow up?

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 20:41**

It's hard, it's rough. So I do have some thoughts on it, but I I get challenged a lot by teachers in that they believe I don't understand how how hard or how tough it is. I do understand it maybe not in this new era of social media, so much so, but, and I know they're tired of people asking them to remind themselves of their why I do a little something different for myself Every morning, I wrote down my purpose and I recorded myself reading my purpose, and then I listened to it every single day, and it

reminds me on a daily basis what I'm about. It starts my day off. It starts it's before I do anything else. I listen to myself, and I actually recited along with it, even on the rough days like this morning, I had a rough start this morning, but I continue to do that. So when I when I come up against the day that is not going the way that I planned, or the way that I like, or something that is out of my control comes my way, or, you know, whatever the case may be. Because teachers, you know, we they're dealing with a juggling a bunch of different things at once, along with their own families, their own struggles, their own identities, whatever the case may be, it reminds me why I continue to do this, that I have given myself to this work, and it's not about me. Just, you know, yes, I have to support myself financially and I have to support my family, but the reason why I do this work is not about me. It's about helping a new generation of students that are coming up that don't have that don't have the guidance that I once had, or that didn't have a teacher that inspired me, or that, you know, I became a reader because the teacher handed me a book. And it was the first time a teacher handed me a book and said, go read this, right? I was expected to just do it on my own. So we have to, we have to remind ourselves of our purpose and commit to walk in that purpose, regardless of what happens. If you are committed to walking in your purpose, if you're committed to defining that for yourself, and regardless of what comes your way, you know, yes, they might ban books, yes, they might change curriculum, or they might say you can't do certain things. But I mean, if you all you want to get really real black folk, we've been here before, where literacy was banned, where it was illegal for us to learn how to read, where we couldn't go to school and post reconstruction, we had one of the highest literacy rates among Black people in the history of this nation. So to say that we can't do that, and we can't replicate that we can't do it again. I would push back a little bit on that. Now, a little bit. I push back a lot on I push back in the fact that I know we can do it. We just have to be committed to do it, and committed to giving our lives to doing so. Now we can't expect everyone to, you know, jump in front, you know of a moving car, and I wouldn't ask anyone to do that, but for those of you who understand your purpose and are willing to continue to walk in it... you have to do that for yourself and surround yourself with people that are doing the same. Because if there's people who are, hey, I'm I got one there are people saying, I got one more year. Y'all can do what you want to do. I'm out of here. You know those, those might not be your people who you would surround yourself with to a certain degree to help you get through these next few years. That might be very challenging and trying for, people that are in our profession.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles 25:03**

What you just described is very closely tied to the title of your book, and something that I want to dive a little deeper into. So my mother used to always say, you don't judge people unless you can walk a mile in their shoes, right? And so your book title of walking their kicks really is about people being able to position themselves in the shoes of black boys in particular. How do we get the world to have empathy, right? All of the things that you just described, from the weaponizing of literacy, weaponizing of learning when we first came to this country, to the reconstruction to all of the kind of barriers and roadblocks that have been put in The way to stop black people from excelling? How do we source empathy for the people who are the most vilified but also the most mimicked in this country, like everybody want to be like us, but nobody wants to be us. Right, right? How do we source empathy?

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 26:19**

Wow, I think we continue to listen to their stories and engage. There's this idea that there's a counter narrative. I push back to that on to a certain degree. I don't disagree with the idea of the counter



narrative. I disagree that it is a counter narrative. I think it is the narrative. I think it is the narrative that we should be tapping into to hear those voices. So we sort empathy. I become empathetic with someone when I fully seek to understand them when I put myself in a position to to hear voices like right now, I'm about to start leading and mentoring a group of young ladies. I don't know what it was like being a girl growing up, particularly being a black girl, I can empathize only because I listen to their stories, I hear what they're saying. I value them. I believe them when they tell me those things. And so empathy, I think, has to do with a lot of self work, of releasing some of what we're holding on to, believing that we're right all the time, and believing that there's only one story, but also making, intentionally making space for others to tell their stories. That's the only way we're going to be able to empathize. I won't know what it's like. You know, like I said, being a being a black girl and being a black woman in America, I won't ever know what it's like, but what I can do is make those conditions right for people to tell those stories, to put things in front of these young ladies, to allow them to, you know, write or read or verbalize or, you know, giving them, scaffolding them, the types of environments and opportunities for them to bring those things out, then I can understand a little bit better and empathize, but I won't fully know. And so what a walk in their kicks, I believe does, and what I intended for it to do was for educators to think about who their black boys are, what they might believe, what some of their stories might be, why they, to a degree, might disconnect with school, and then develop instruction around those things, and I think it can easily be done. I've had some, some students come back to me. I told you I never asked for permission for anything. I just, I just did it like you know, I'll ask for forgiveness later. I would have students come back to me and tell me that my classroom, or the way that I engage them, was some of the most engaging instructional environments that they've had in their in their careers. I had the same when I taught college students, one you know, group of students at does the university know you're teaching it this way? I'm like, oh, no, you know. Maybe there's only way I know how to teach it. So we have to step out. It's okay to... It's not okay to be fearful. People, it's okay to understand the danger that might come, but fear is not real because it hasn't happened yet. So we have to, we have to do the things, we have to listen to the stories, we have to engage in ways that we know are good for other people, and step back and understand that our stories aren't the only ones, and that there are others who can tell about you know, how they interact with schools, whether it be other teachers, administrators need to understand teachers better, and vice versa. Teachers need to understand administrators better. Students need to understand each other better. We only do that by continuing engaging in those types of communities.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles 30:47**

Amen. your wheels spinning. Dr. Postell, I see you coming off mute. Come on, what you got, what you got for us, what you got for us?

**Dr. Carla Postell 30:56**

I love that. Hearing about that female mentoring. I definitely want to hear more about that, which led me to think about you sharing some of the other things that you you have going or coming up. I know I saw a presentation with ASCD in Ghana, some social professional. Or can you talk a little bit more about that? And again, definitely, you know, female mentoring, as people say, That's my jam. Want to dig a little bit more into that, as to where or what, I love to hear that too.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 31:26**

Yeah. So I, you know, I was, I was a really shy young man, and I stayed to myself a lot, and I wrote and just read books and so, you know, to some degree, some may say, I don't know, I don't know if I was timid, but I was definitely meek in my adulthood. I like when I see an opportunity, I'm like, I can do that, and I'll just go for it. And so I saw ASCD Ghana flash something across their Instagram, not Instagram, but their LinkedIn page, and they said, Hey, come do a presentation on leadership in Ghana. And I'm like, wow, yes, I'm doing a proposal. And so I connected with two colleagues of mine, and we are we put together a proposal to talk about how to transform leadership through collaboration. And so we submitted it to ASCD Ghana. It was accepted. And so in July, we will be presenting to folks from all over the world about how we can use our experiences in leadership to help others and so connected to that, to some degree, we're going to look at it from a couple of different points of view, but connected to that, to some degree, I have an upcoming, upcoming project with two other colleagues of mine, where we are contracted through Core Corwin to write a book on 21 effective leadership competencies that leaders through an equity lens, that leaders can engage and to make their schools more equitable, so that that should be coming out in September. But merging all of those things together, I, you know, I kind of operate in a few different lanes, I would say instructional, excuse me, instructional work that I do, leadership work that I do, and then the mentoring. So I started this kind of offshoot of archetype consulting called the scholar achievement network. And a colleague and Maya started off last year with some engagements with students, where we took them on a retreat to Michigan State University, and we taught them communication protocols, and we allowed them that space that Mrs. Clark tools was talking about earlier, to be themselves, to access their own identities. And then from that, the scholar achievement network was born to do the ongoing mentoring of when we took the students, it was all young men. So we've expanded it. We're expanding it this year to young men and young ladies, and working with other colleagues who have some expertise in that area. And like I said, I was never a black girl. I didn't grow up as a black girl, and I'm not a black woman, and so we have, we're connecting with other black women or black girls who may be able to help in that regard, because there may be things I just don't understand. We need others that that that would be able to both be able to empathize and maybe even have some shared experiences. So I'm sorry I felt like I went all over the place, but yeah, just a few things that I've been working on. No

**Dr. Carla Postell** 34:52

Thank you. That was perfect. You addressed all three. I can't wait to hear how everything turns out or as you. To your finishing both for all three. I'll toss the mic over to Dr. Scott.

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 35:09

This has been so much fun having a good time listening to you share your genius. Thank you again.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 35:16

Thank you.

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 35:17

I had another question about the book, and I kind of just instead of just, instead of asking a more specific question, I kind of wanted to open the floor for you to just share some kind of general thoughts, like inspiration behind the book, what led to you writing it, any specific anecdotes or things that you



want to share from the book that you feel that people would need to get out of it. Come on. Just, just, just hear from you, from the author's perspective, about the book a little bit more.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 35:43

Yes, so I this actually was my dissertation, and so it's funny, a colleague of mine that was helping me in going through the dissertation process said, just get it done. This. This is not dissertation. Is a task, not your life's work.

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 36:06

That's exactly what I was told.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 36:07

Yes!

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 36:09

I'm more intrigued. Just get it done. You're not, you're not adding to the field. You just getting, just get the dissertation done. Yes.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 36:16

And I'm like, Huh? I want it to be my life's work. I want it to like, I'm putting so much into this, so much study, so much, you know, research, so much money. Like, this is about to be my life's work. But I didn't want it to, I didn't want it to just live, just some place where I would only be able to access it. And I thought the work was important enough to share with the world, so I ripped it back all apart, and I reformatted it, and took some of the more academic language out of it that you have to put in it, and made it more usable, hopefully more usable for teachers to be able to access for their classrooms. Because I think it's a for me, it's a career study of teachers and what they can do for their classrooms. And so, more specifically, I took teachers through a book club to show them how to use book club as a means to engage their African American boys in school based literacy. And one of my educational Heroes is Alfred Tatum, and I had studied a lot of his work beforehand, and so I used his book teaching reading to adolescent black males as the book for the book club. And so it, for me, it was one of the most phenomenal experiences, because not only did I get to engage with teachers from across the metro area and collect their thoughts and feelings about how they specifically taught their African American boys, they allowed me to record, translate, transcribe all of their recordings that I put them in groups, and I just recorded all of their conversations, and it was one of the most amazing things, because I got to understand their thinking around what they thought about black boys, how they taught them, what their what their hopes and fears were for them, what their mistakes were, and what their misconceptions. And so that helped me to craft that in such a way that we can understand black boys just a little bit differently or better than we had in the past, and hence the title of walking their kicks. One of the story I mentioned, mentioned stories that Dr. Postell about. One thing that stood out to me about the young man in the hallway. Another one stood out for me when a teacher—and it came it came across on the recording—she said, so this is just about giving a damn for students. This is this all this is about.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles** 39:28

Imagine that! The nerve.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 39:31

I listen to that and was like, yes, that's it!

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 39:35

It's rocket science.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles** 39:41

Rocket science, it's not but yes.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 39:46

So I wanted to call the book that in the beginning, and the publisher kind of pushed back on it. And you know, I had a colleague of mine who said, Maybe you should think about that differently. So I. On chapter nine. It's called giving the damn as a strategy for improving student outcomes. And so at the end of the day, you know, we talked about this a little bit earlier, I sometimes I walk into a place and I don't believe I have the skillset, or I don't, maybe I don't have the expertise or experience to do a certain thing, but because of the level of care that I have for students, and the level of passion that I have towards helping them to achieve their goals and their dreams, and they're not only just for their future, but for what school should be, you know, I can learn the skills behind it, and so I don't even know if I answered your question. Dr Scott, but I'm just, you know, I got me rolling down this hill, and I just, I'll keep going. So that was one of the moments that stuck out for me. You know, I told I talked about the moment with my son who asked me, why don't we just figure out what we want and then teaches that. But if I may go back just a little bit, I grew up on the west side of Detroit, and I went to school on the east side. So every morning I rode this school bus across town to go to school. And if there are any people that are connected to Bates Academy. Shout out to the Bates Academy alum, Bates Academy alum, teachers and current staff of Bates Academy. It was one of the most it was one of the best parts of my life, those years that I spent at Bates, because I had some of the most amazing teachers on the planet, and they came in, they just kicked butt every single day. They kicked butt to make sure that we had students, we had what we needed in our lives with regard to math instruction, literacy instruction, you know, just social, you know, learning how to get along socially. But at the time in the early 80s, Bates was not in the best neighborhood. And so I tell a story in this, in this, in the beginning, intro the book, how this young man put ahead, I put a gun to my head. And back in the 80s, it was checking in. You know, it was time to give up an article of your clothing. You had to check it in. And so he did that. And one of the things that ran through my mind while, you know, I was at school at the time, I was out on the playground playing baseball, one of the things ran that ran through my mind was, why isn't he at school? like my man at school. Why isn't this kid at school? Yeah. And so the years since that's happened, I've been trying to place myself as much as I can in the life of that young man who I never actually met, but place myself in the life of that young man who felt like his only option, or one of his options was to go around in, you know, carrying a gun and stealing fifth graders, shoes off their feet. And so that, when you talk about the impetus for this book, that is, that has been one of the driving forces that not only was the inspiration, if you will. I don't know if inspiration is the right word, but inspiration for writing this book, it it has been one of the driving forces for me to continue to do this

work, so that we can make school so important to young men, and we can give them the options and the opportunities that they need, that they don't have to do those types of things.

**Vonetta Clark-Toolles 43:48**

That could have turned out so many different ways, right? It makes me think of the question that people say, ask, What's wrong with you, as opposed to asking what happened to you? Right? What happened to that young man that that was what he had to do, or felt like he had to do in order to survive, in order to thrive, in order to have value. But it also made me think about when I read it, all of the different ways it could have played out for you. Were it not for the social supports and the family supports that you had right, a safety net to help you heal from that and to be able to see a different way right, because it could have caused you to turn right. You know there were things that your peers were doing that you talk about as well. I mean, and we all you know, probably know that person who went left and we kept going straight right or went left and we went right, and what the implications of those outcomes are? So I would like for you to talk a little bit about how family played a role in becoming who you are. And what would you say to parents of black boys?

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 45:17**

Wow. You are...

**Vonetta Clark-Toolles 45:22**

Listen, we ask the questions, and they always get answers. So just say, what you gonna say!

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 45:28**

I love it, because, you know, I could talk about this all day long, and like the questions that you are asking are hitting right home for me. It was tough. You know, we when you grow up in trauma, it's not you don't always get the social support or the, you know, the social and emotional support or mental health support that you need, because you have several folks that might be going through different traumas of their own simultaneously. So I'll say this that in my family, the school was always stressed as being one of the most important things. We always didn't have the tools to do certain things, or we didn't have, you know, my parents and grandparents and maybe have the knowledge to be able to do certain things, but they impressed upon me how important it was for me to continue to move forward, and as best as they could put me in situations and opportunities that one kept me off the street, that kept me going straight when some of my friends were going left and going right and making U turns. I was scared of my grandfather, to be honest with you, my grandfather was crazy. Like my grandfather was crazy if you caught me doing something that I shouldn't have been doing, like I was scared of what he would do, you know. And so I talked earlier about fear not being okay, like I was. I was fearful of all of him. But I think what black parents can do, and I'm actually, I'm about to start offering this as part of the work that I do, because I realize as I as an adult, as I was healing, I could better raise my own children to be healed, or at least be more healed than I had. And so my kids have had different opportunities parents, what parents can do is continue to reach out to the resources that may be provided. You know that they may not even know about when I see somebody that is, you know, doing well in business. My son wants to go in business. I don't have a business degree. I can't help them, but I would say, Hey, you would be great to mentor my son like you sound like you know what you're doing. You know what you're talking I'm always looking for mentors. I'm always looking for, you know, people

as resources to help my own children. Black parent, or any parent for that matter, should not be afraid to say, I don't know. I can't help my kid in this way. However, I want to put you in the best the best environment to help you to do those things that you say you want to do with your life. And so what schools can do is schools have immense resources across the county. Wayne RESA is a resource they live in. Oakland county. Oakland Schools is a resource. They live in Macomb. Macomb is a resource. But the state of Michigan can also be a resource to find out what opportunities are available for their children, to keep them engaged. Like, for instance, I wasn't the best mathematician. You know, growing up, I knew nothing about engineering, but I knew DAPCEP existed, right? So every Saturday morning, guess where my son was going to be. He was going to be in depth. Set right? I didn't at one point he said he wanted to be a doctor. Okay, let's, let's connect you with young doctors, and so put them through the young doctors program. He eventually said he didn't want to do that, but I told him all along, you tell me what you want to do, and it's my job to find the resources to get you there, even if I don't know how to do it. So parents, they have a challenge in that many times they might feel this disconnection from their local schools, but there's resources at the at the county level. Many people, many parents, don't even know like being unless you're an educator or connect to an educator. Many people, parents don't even know that Wayne RESA exists. As an intermediate school district that provides services for your kids. Many parents don't know that Oakland schools exist as a intermediate school district. So if parents are listening, I you know, if you don't find what you need at your local school district, I would say, please reach out to your intermediate school districts, the MD, the MD website, and their folks at the Michigan Department of Education, who, surprisingly, you know, looking at the amount of responsibility they have across the state, are extremely responsive. Like I called there last week to get an answer to a question. Somebody called me back within a couple of hours like to answer my question. I don't work for MBE. I don't work for a particular school district, but they call me back to answer my question. And so speaking of answering questions, I'm not sure if I'm answering your question, but I'm saying this to the degree that the parents that might be listening to this Don't be afraid to say you don't know, and don't be afraid to you know, reach out to others that are that may be outside of your school district, that might be able to help you do some of the things you want to do. But part of the work that I'm going to, I'm starting to engage in now, is doing that parent engagement serving as a resource to parents on the ground who may just be who may be afraid to even ask the question, to let alone, you know, engage your kids in ways that they're they may not be used to. You touched on so much in such a little bit of time. To hear from myself. Our backgrounds are actually very similar. Grew up on the west side, went to Brooks Middle School on the west side, and Vonetta was actually one of my teachers. In fact. Love it. I love it.

**Dr. Terrance Scott 51:50**

It was always, always led a full circle piece. But I also caught the bus to King on the east side. So that was a very interesting experience for me, too. But my mom, you know, growing up in a single parent household, my mom didn't go to college herself, but for me, it was always not if I go to school, but when I go to school. She instilled that mentality in me from a young age, and all too was a dab set kid and just, I think, she actively sought out resources and supports to make sure that I knew what opportunities were out there, even if she couldn't provide them, somebody could. And so I had experiences. I was a church kid. I had experiences through my church and just do different things that I did that many of my classmates and friends didn't. And we didn't pay for a lot of it because we couldn't afford to. But I think you're right in that parents need to, like, resources aren't gonna just fall in your lap all the time. And

even with social media, they low key kind of do, like they got social media today, where they actually can have resources drop in their lap, but even still, seek them out. But it starts with talking to your kids and seeing what their interests are and exposing them to different things, to give them access to it, just to try it, just to see. My son is seven. He's in soccer. He's in swim. He's a burgeoning artist. He loves to draw. In his love language if he likes you, he'll draw your pictures, it's like the sweetest thing ever, right? So just like, what do we do to make our kids feel not just special, but make them feel like they matter enough so their experiences and their interests matter? Like, what can we do to continue to build that up so of that notion of continuing to encourage parents to support their kids by seeking out resources based on their kids interests. Their kids are interested in it, if they'll be motivated to do it. Intrinsically, forcing kids to do stuff almost never works. It didn't work for us. It didn't as kids. It's not gonna work for y'all either as parents. So getting that out of your head. But one other thing that you touched on, too, I think, is really important to mention, is that parents themselves, a lot of people forget that they, too, were kids once, and they also have their own traumas that they experience in school and their own things like that, in their own baggage that they bring with them. So they become parents, they're trying to shield their kids from the issues that they dealt with because of that trust piece. So it's even more of a reason for us to seek out parents engage with them and try to build that trust piece. So thank you for listening to all of that. Just want to just kind of summarize your thoughts.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 54:27

Yeah, absolutely.

**Vonetta Clark-Toolles** 54:28

Well, I'll go a step further to say parents, if you're listening, follow Wayne RESA on your social right. Because to your point, Dr. Scott, the resources can fall in your lap, but not if you're not following the right things and the right people. Right? What we do on social media is only as helpful as how we utilize that tool as a resource. Follow Oakland schools. Follow Macomb ISD. Follow tri-county multicultural math leaders. I'll. Follow, follow these spaces and places that are going to provide access and opportunity for your students. All of us, I think, are here. I know I have a similar story to both of you in terms of growing up on the west side of the city of Detroit, and no folks who did not here, right? We would be the same age, but they are no longer in the land of the living, and so it's about the choices that we make and the opportunities that we provide to our children. So parents, we here and we walking with you. So know that there are resources and people on your side.

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 55:38

Yeah, that's what's up. Well, listen, we can do this all day. Such it's been such a privilege and honor to listen to you talk your talk for a little bit. Doctor thank you very much. Want to give you the chance to share any, any final nuggets or thoughts or gems that you have, anything that you want to share that you hadn't had gotten a chance to share about, that we didn't ask about already, anything on your heart that you want to just get off to make sure that the folks know what's going on.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 55:38

Absolutely. And I would say also, don't be afraid to all people can do is say no. I was in Los Angeles, and I was at a Lakers game, and met this guy who works for Dodge, and I and I said, You know what, my son is really into cars, and he wants to go into business. I'm gonna introduce you. And so he lived in

Los Angeles at the time, and he moved to Chicago a little bit later on, but the the point is, it encouraged my son to go to the university that he's at right now. Because this... I say young man, because I'm much older than he is, but this young man went to a particular university, and then my son, you know, after we made this connection, he made good on his word, and he couldn't mentor him like he really wanted to, but he connected him to others who were able to help him in his journey. And so I would say to parents, don't be afraid, like when you see somebody that has a particular skill set or knowledge base, like, you know, even if it's just for that moment, like, how can I direct my kid or my daughter or my son in this way? Because I see, you know, their interests align with yours, and how can I help them get to where you are or get to you know, particular place and where people generally don't say no, and so I'm just bold enough to say, hey, you sound like you know what you talking about. Listen, I want to connect you to my kid. Yeah, I want to, I want to give a shameless plug, if I may.

**Dr. Terrance Scott 57:45**

please do.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson 57:46**

A couple things I am doing a I talked about it a little bit earlier. I'm doing this summer, in June, if, if listeners go to my website in June for teachers. I'm doing an in person session called the Summer Cipher series, using writing instruction as a tool for student liberation. So the in person of that cipher series will be June, 23 and 24th and then I'll be repeating those same things on June, 25 and 26th but through zoom. So if educators, or even teachers, anybody who's involved in wanting to help students dig into their writing and helping them to express themselves in that way. Please take a look at the website, sign up for the newsletter, and then through the newsletter, I'll be sending more information out about that, because that's really my passion. I really was able to get to, I believe, where I where I am now, at least academically and even, you know, understand my own self identity was through my writing and so that that that helped to lead me to a path of the self discovery, understanding who I was and when I didn't have a way to express myself in any other way. I wrote it down, I wrote a poem, I wrote a short story, you know, whatever the case may be. And I think, you know, students don't have those outlets. They can have at least that one, that one, or, you know, very few outlets to use. And so this, this summer, cipher series, would be used to help teachers, to help students to do those things. Okay, um, so my web my web page is [www.archetypeconsultingllc.com](http://www.archetypeconsultingllc.com), so, A, R, C, H, E, T, Y, P, E, consulting. Llc.com, and so if you go there, sign up for the newsletter, and then you'll be able to get and Mrs. Clark-Tooles talked about, talked about that a little bit earlier, like that's that's a way. I don't know who's reading it, to be honest with you, but that's the way I get, I, you know, am able to appease that writing book that comes within me. I talk about things that are that are happening socially, but that relate to education, so and then later on in the summer, I'll be doing a summer cipher series for leading for liberation. I'm still working on getting that squared away, but for leaders that want to figure out how they can use their skill sets and learn new skill sets to help students and teachers get to places of liberation through their leadership. I'll be doing that a little bit. So stay tuned for that one. And then I'll end by saying this, this is a labor of love for me. I you know, some days I wake up, I'm like, why am I still doing this? Like I'm tired, you know, I gotta go this place and this place and that place. But I'm, I'm very blessed to have connections with people like yourselves, people across Southeast Michigan. I've connected with educators across this country. And, in some cases, I'll, I'll be thinking about, like, maybe I should try learning this new thing, or learning that new thing. I'm doing what I'm passionate about. And



so I'll continue to repeat that purpose to myself every morning, and continue to walk in my purpose. And so whatever comes out of that will come. And I'm so blessed and appreciative of folks like you and other folks out there who are doing this work, doing the real work for our students. And may, in some cases, may not even get the recognition, but you still get up every day and you come in and you do it. So I appreciate all of you doing that.

**Dr. Terrance Scott** 1:02:02

Awesome, awesome. Thank you so much. And Carla, about a month or so ago, we were at the leaders liberate conference, and Dr. David Kirkland personally gave Dr Aaron Johnson a shout out about his book. That was a super incredible, crazy moment. And so just to see like genius, compliment genius in the space. Just thank you again for sharing, for your brilliance, for your vulnerability, and for your willingness to just impart some knowledge and wisdom upon the people. We're truly honored to have you here. Thank you again for being our guest. And yeah, that's a wrap getting to the club podcast. Wayne RESA, thank you all for listening, and we out.

**Vonetta Clark-Tooles** 1:02:44

Peace.

**Dr. Aaron Johnson** 1:02:47

Peace.