

Constructing the

INNOCENT<sup>®</sup>

Classroom

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# Innocent Classroom Commitment

Every child deserves to feel Innocent – to be free of the negative influence and impact of stereotypes and stereotyped expectations – in the time they are with you in your school.

# Constructing the Innocent Classroom

- We take a unique approach to addressing inequity and disparity through the strengthening of relationships throughout a school community.
- It is based on the idea that the pervasiveness of stereotypes impacts everything in our work - and that impact is individual, creating barriers to effective relationships and that undergirds disparity and inequity in our spaces.

# The Goals of Innocent Classroom

Our goal is to help every educator develop the skills and practice necessary to build these types of relationships with every single child, particularly Black, brown, and indigenous children.

And the focus is a commitment to a practice in building relationships that creates the conditions in which Innocence is possible, expected even.

Which means every child will have the greatest opportunity to perform at the highest levels in our spaces.

# Constructing the Innocent Classroom

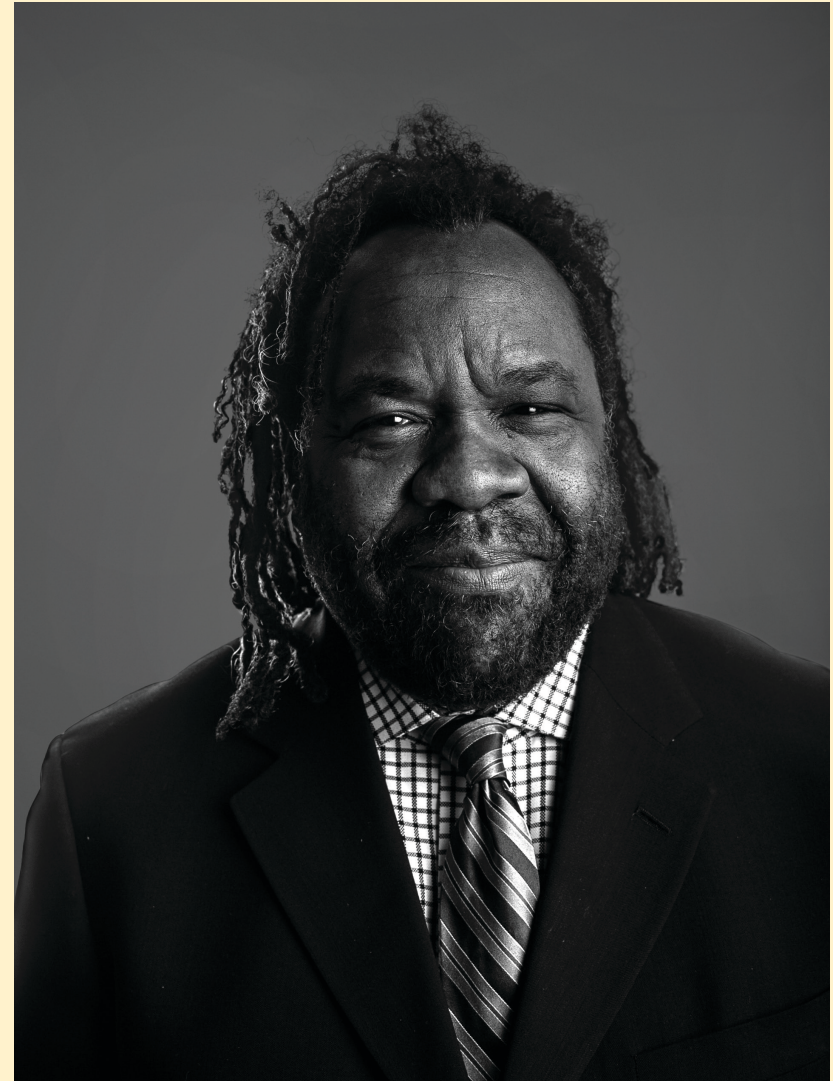
- Over 10,000 educators have been trained.
- Today, you are joining this movement of educators.
- Began by Alexs Pate in 2012 as a simple theory:  
children learn better from people they believe truly  
care about them.



# Alexs' journey

“I began to really think - I thought of how afraid I was to travel that distance, and it took a while. But it was one of those moments. I was like, Why am I so afraid? Why are there certain places I don't go?”

The whole thing about what I was feeling - that guilt - it wasn't what it was doing to me, it was what I wasn't doing. It was the way I was holding myself in. Not expanding my experience. How it had affected my life.”



- There is an answer to the serious and in some cases life limiting, even life threatening problems confronting American public education. We believe that answer is the restoration and maintenance of innocence in marginalized children. The opposite of innocence, guilt, is the primary barrier for children of color in the classroom.

# Constructing the Innocent Classroom

Creating the conditions necessary through our relationships to positively impact social and academic results for our Black, brown, and indigenous students.





# The Innocent Classroom

- The Innocent Classroom is not about race, per se. It addresses the damage that racial and ethnic stereotyping, negative popular imagery and negative popular narratives have done to Black and other children of color.
- We seek to bring into focus the natural relationship between innocence and a vital engagement with education and the desire to learn.

# The Innocent Classroom

- Building your practice as an Innocent Classroom educator is like a new operating system. It is not a checklist that is complete after you have gone through the training.
- Our approach is a process, a practice that is built that becomes a way of approaching every child, especially our Black, brown, and indigenous children.

# Constructing the Innocent Classroom

- Choose three children that you work with regularly to focus on as you build your practice.
- We are going to stay focused on these individual children throughout our work together.
- Our goal is to use what we are learning to build a relationship with each of these children that creates the opportunity for innocence.

# Practice Building: Small Groups

- Start with an individual child – begin with the essentials: first name, age/grade, why you are focusing on this child.
- Share what you are seeing from the individual child – behaviors, how this child “shows up” in your space
- Then share about what is important to the child– who they are, what they are passionate about, what makes them happy, their family, etc.

There are three things that must be said at the outset:

- Race is a social construction
- The subconscious mind is more powerful than we are often willing to admit; and
- The knowledge of one's own innocence is fundamental to our capacity to grow.

If these three ideas can be internalized, it is possible to imagine that the restoration and protection of a child's sense of their own innocence is also possible.

# The Research on Stereotype Consciousness and Threat

- Clark McKown defines stereotype consciousness as “knowledge that others endorse beliefs about the characteristics of ethnic groups.”

- The danger of stereotype consciousness, however, is that it can very easily trigger stereotype threat – “the fear that one’s behavior may confirm or be understood in terms of a negative stereotype associated with one’s social group,” (Steele, 1999).

# Definitions

## **Guilt**

The cumulative impact of negative stereotypes that affect attitude and behavior. The absence of innocence.

This feeling of guilt is more of a translation of the negative expectations that envelop their lives than it is a statement of fact. Unfortunately most of our children are aware, at a very early age of this feeling of guilt and exhibit its negative consequences before they even know what it is that motivates their behavior.



We must know our children  
well enough to stimulate the  
fullest engagement from the  
most wounded.

What does American society tell  
you about children of color?

What is that list that resides in your conscious and  
perhaps more importantly, your unconscious mind?

- These stereotypes force their victims to anticipate these assumptions about them. It forces them to compensate and adjust their behavior accordingly.

## Small Group discussion

- As we think about our students, how might we see this guilt manifest in what we are seeing and hearing from them?
  - Be specific – what are the ways our kids “show up”, talk to us, interact with us, that might be indicators of the presence of guilt

# Understanding Guilt

It is essential we come to understand two things:

- The ways in which the weight of guilt is bestowed on children and how this weight might work against the efforts of the educator.
- And we must become aware of epistemology and the way guilt operates in the relationships between children and educators.

# Constructing Innocence

- It is the educator who has the transformative power to reduce, minimize, neutralize and, when we fully commit to the practice, eliminate the guilt a child carries with them in our spaces.
- This doesn't happen by chance.

# Definitions

## **Innocence**

Our new definition of innocence can be understood as the condition that results from the reduction, minimization, neutralization or elimination of the guilt that develops from stereotypes, popular negative narratives and iconography

# Pathway to Innocence

- That innocence—a child free, for at least the time they are with you, of the suspicious, tainted eye of society—is a significant pre-condition to their capacity to learn.
- The existence and impact of narratives, unaddressed by contemporary approaches in many ways, leaves us short of doing the very thing that serves as a key to opening up possibilities for children.



# Pathway to Innocence

- And that key exists fundamentally, if not solely, in our capacity to see and know our children in a way that allows for the emergence of innocence as the imperative in our spaces.
- But that knowledge cannot be general – to get an accurate understanding of the child, for the possibility of innocence to become beyond question for a child, we must first understand their Good.

# Definitions

## **Good**

“Perhaps we may define it as that for the sake of which everything else is done.”

To put it another way, there is a reason why a child does what it is they are doing. Why they think the way they do. Why they respond to us in a particular fashion. We can't understand what that is if we consciously or unconsciously rely on stereotypes to discern the origin of their impulses. We must seek out that child's Good.

# The Good

- Belonging
- Free
- Smart
- Safe
- Untroubled
- Happy
- Connected
- Successful
- Accepted
- Validated
- Hope
- Seen
- Cared for
- Survival
- Normal
- Respected
- Leadership
- Stable



# Building a Practice: Understanding

- Again, begin with one educator and one child.
  - Start by sharing what you are seeing from the individual child – behaviors, how this child “shows up” in your space
  - Then share other things you know about the individual child – who they are, what they are passionate about, what they have been willing to share with you.
- Try to take a preliminary guess at the Good of this child – remember, this is centered on how the child experiences the world
- Identify at least three strategies you can use to get to know more about this individual child with the focus on their Good.

## The Good

Belonging	Validated
Free	Hope
Smart	Seen
Safe	Stable
Untroubled	Cared for
Happy	Survival
Connected	Normal
Successful	Respected
Accepted	Leadership

# Reflection:

- What opportunities do you see in approaching our work and our children through this practice?
- What challenges might there be in approaching our work and our children through this practice?
- What are specific ways you are thinking about this in relation to your role and your school?