

Dr. Johnny Lake

[00:00:00] **Rafael Otto:** Welcome to the Early Link Podcast. I'm Rafael Otto. Thanks for listening. You can always catch us on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro on Sundays at 4:30pm or tune in at your convenience, wherever you find your podcasts, including iTunes, Spotify, and Amazon Music.

Today, I'm speaking with Dr. Johnny Lake, an international consultant and trainer on community building, equity, diversity, and leadership, with a focus on what youth need and what our education systems need to better serve students and young people. His scholarship has focused on diversity, race and culture and personal and organizational growth. And he is a writer and a storyteller who uses story to build relationships. Johnny, welcome to the podcast today.

[00:00:42] **Johnny Lake:** Thank you Rafael. I've been looking forward to this.

[00:00:45] **Rafael Otto:** It's great to have you, I'm looking forward to the conversation. I thought you could start with... because I know your work is grounded in story, and if you could start with the story about how and where you grew up and what education was like at that time.

[00:01:01] **Johnny Lake:** Yes. I grew up in Tennessee, a small town, about 60 miles from Memphis. I grew up where racial segregation was the norm. I'm actually old enough that I was in racially segregated schools for my first four years where everybody was Black. Teachers were Black. Principal was Black. Janitor was Black. PE teacher was Black. Everybody was Black. So, questions about race, especially compared to white people, didn't even come up because the white school, about a mile away, had all white kids, all white teachers, everything else. My whole family had attended those same schools, where the books we had were the throw away books from the white school.

We never got new books. We got the books that had been discarded. I talked to my auntie who was 90 some years old, and I asked her about schools and she says, "They didn't give us money for schools." I said, "They didn't give you money. How did

you have schools?" She said, "We donated money and hired a teacher for our children."

I said, "What about books, auntie?" And she gave me another incredulous look, "Books?" she said, "They didn't ever give us books either baby." I said, "Where did you get books, auntie?" She said when they throw away the books at the white school, the shoe man downtown would collect the discarded books. And she says the Black people would go downtown to the shoe man to buy books for their children.

[00:02:18] **Rafael Otto:** Wow...

[00:02:19] **Johnny Lake:** This was the inequity that was built into education when it was segregated. Nobody ever talked much about the difference in achievement between Black children and white children because there was no real comparison. It was obvious white children were better funded. Their schools were better funded.

There's one school in Georgia I researched where the bus budget for the white school exceeded the entire budget for the Black school, which didn't have buses at all.

[00:02:44] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:02:44] **Johnny Lake:** So this was my experience. Seeing *White Only* signs in businesses. I remember going to the gas station with my mother. We'd buy gas and my mother could not use the bathroom. We'd have to go in the bushes for my mother and sisters to use the bathroom. This was in my lifetime. We think it's a long time ago. I went my first four years. My auntie was my first grade teacher. So I had it made it to first grade. is the way school works, I want to go to school on the weekend.

It was just like, cool. Second grade. I got into class with a woman who, a girl who knew my father when they were growing up. So I was teacher's pet the second

grade. Third grade I got in the classroom with a woman who was straight from the army, I think, because she was the toughest teacher I had. And to this day, I'll tell you she was a good teacher, and I've told her when I've gone back home. But at third grade I would have bumped her off if I could have.

[00:03:31] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:03:31] **Johnny Lake:** And fourth grade I got back in the classroom with another woman who had grown up with my father. So she thought I was really cute too. So by fourth grade, I had a real grounding in my own identity as a Black child who was smart. And then integration came along.

Everybody knows about the history of taking Black kids out of schools and putting them into white schools. Ain't too much history about white kids getting taken out of white schools and put in Black schools. People should pay attention to that, because the jobs of Black teachers and Black administrators disappeared with integration. Because those teachers and administrators did not go to the white schools with the kids.

In fact, we were sent as voluntary integration. The first couple of years of integration was not mandatory. It was voluntary. So I was the only Black kid in the class for the first time in my life in my fifth grade. And that was difficult, but I was a knucklehead remember?

So I wasn't scared of white people. If somebody pick on me, I'm going to beat up everybody in the classroom.

[00:04:26] **Rafael Otto:** Self- described knucklehead.

[00:04:28] **Johnny Lake:** Yes, yes. Self described knucklehead! So I got in trouble because the most knuckleheaded white boy and I had a fight the first day. But I'll tell you over time - and I shared this story with children - that me and that boy got on the same football team, the same baseball team. We played together, ended up being best friends, even though we started out with a conflict. But what I found

when I got to the white school was that I was not an A- student, Rafael. I was an A- student first grade, second grade, third grade. I was a kid that was always top of the class. When I got into fifth grade, I'm struggling. I'm making C's and D's and I'm not figuring it out until I figured out, wait a minute... I'm behind because of the resources I had and opportunities to learn. These kids were in those books two or three years before I was. And it took me a couple of years to actually catch up academically. But this is what my mother knew, why she sent me to the white school. She knew it was a better educational opportunity then.

[00:05:24] **Rafael Otto:** Okay. Talk a little bit more about this question of identity and navigating identity through this change. Because, and I know I ask in part, because I know that shows up in your work with schools and educators and students today.

[00:05:39] **Johnny Lake:** Yes, that affirmation of a child's ability to be smart or successful at school. Without race as the criteria was really important as a foundation for me. I knew I was smart. My grandma told me I was smart. My grandma said, "You pretty little Black boy," she said, "I wish all my grandbabies was as Black as you are."

She said, "You're so smart, baby," she said, "Study hard, you gone' make a smart man one day." And she says, "You got pretty teeth, brush them so you can keep them." She was a practical old woman too. But I explained to teachers, couldn't my grandma just as well been affirming a boy with red hair? "Baby you've got the prettiest red hair I've ever seen in my life, wish all my grandbabies had pretty red hair just like yours."

"All them boys, their little chubby belly's sticking out. Baby, that's the cutest belly I've ever seen. I wish all my grandbabies had one like yours." Or the girl with skinny legs. "Baby, you got the prettiest little legs I've seen in my life. Wish all my grandbabies had pretty little legs like yours." So my grandma was not simply working with a race issue.

She was working with the self-esteem of a little child. Affirming me that I was a good boy, that I was smart and that I was going to be something one day. What does every one of our children deserve? Need and deserve? Every day, they come to your classroom. I do this with the adult audiences. I go to the back of the room, 'cause I say, "I know why y'all sitting back here. 'Cause this is where I used to sit." And I go back there and I said, "You know, Rafael, I'm so glad you're here. We're going to have a good time and we're going to learn a lot." And the person just beams. I says, "How did that feel to you?" They says, "Wonderful." I asked the audience, I said, "How did that feel to you?" They says, "Great." I says, "Have we ever met?" "Not before today." "Do you know me? No." "Do I know you? No." I said, "You can affirm a person that you don't even know." I said, "What can you do for a child who comes to your classroom every single day? Simply by doing what? Affirming them. ' We're so glad you're here. We're going to have a good time and we're going to learn a lot.'" And that doesn't cost you anything. I'll go around and I'll affirm two or three people. And then I'll tell the teachers, "Phew boy, I'm exhausted." Apparently two or three kids just wore me out.

And it doesn't! You can affirm every child in your your class every day. And that's what teachers should be doing. Every one of our children deserve to be told that they are good children, that they're smart, and that you're really going to be something one day.

[00:07:48] **Rafael Otto:** So, I'm going to pivot because you grew up in Tennessee. You came to Oregon about 30 years ago. And I want to ask what it was like when you first came to talk about race and what's changed or what hasn't.

[00:08:04] **Johnny Lake:** Oh, my goodness, my goodness. It was longer than 30 years ago when I first came. I came to Oregon, I was 19 afro I was this big, I was the coolest thing walking. And they asked me, "You want to go to Oregon?" I'm in Tennessee and I'm like, "Sure, I'll go to Oregon. It can't be that much different than Tennessee. It's in America, right?" I mean I was raised-

[00:08:23] **Rafael Otto:** Little did you know...

[00:08:24] **Johnny Lake:** ...to believe that this was like, you know, one country, we all could go places. And I got to Oregon and people... first time I have ever heard this question, "Why are you Black?" Do you think anybody back in Tennessee ever asked me why I was Black?

[00:08:35] **Rafael Otto:** Why? People asked you why?

[00:08:36] **Johnny Lake:** I'm like why am I Black?

And I said, "Well, why are you white?" Maybe that's a better question. 'Cause everybody around here is white. Maybe y'all can answer that better than I can. But those conversations about race were incredibly sensitive. But people, and this is typical of people who are uncomfortable with race is, I have to tell you a joke about race. But I got to tell you about the basketball team, they won, where they had a Black person who was on the team, or I know this Black person that I heard references people make to somebody you don't even know, tells you how uncomfortable they are. So it was always uncomfortable because I was very comfortable with being who I am. So I'm in a room full of white people and someone walks up to me and says, "Johnny, I don't even think about you as being Black. I just treat you like a do all my other friends." No Black person never did that.

No Black person ever walk up to me and said, "Hey, I didn't notice you were Black." No person of color ever did that. But it was a white person who, if they truly didn't notice me, Rafael, my race, how would they greet? What would their greeting be?

[00:09:33] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:09:34] **Johnny Lake:** It'd be, "Hello. How are you doing"? But they did notice, and it got so uncomfortable they had to do something about their own uncomfortableness. So they reached out to the universe and get this most inane statement you could possibly make in a room full of white people with one Black person: I didn't notice you were Black. And so that's how people try to avoid the conversation, but at the same time having a conversation; and when they say I treat you like I do all my other friends, they're not talking about friends that are Black.

They're not talking about friends of color. They're talking about white friends. So technically, they just erase me. They just said, "Johnny, I don't think about you as being Black. I just treat you like you are... white".

If I'm an aware person of color, I might accept this deal, which means I'll be token white. They'll be real white and we both will operate like white people, which means we're not going to talk about the issue of race that just showed up for them when I came in the room. I'm not going to tell them I got racially profiled and pulled over out in front of the building here before I came in. I'm not going to tell them I get watched in the stores and they follow me around, or that my children have difficulties at school because of their race, because I don't want to make my nice white friends uncomfortable. So, not only does this silence white people... who else gets silenced? People of color who don't want to deal with the uncomfortableness of talking about race with white people,

[00:10:51] **Rafael Otto:** unfortunately.

Talk a little bit more about when you're working with groups and you're talking about diversity, equity and inclusion. What are some of the tools that you're using? Or what are the necessary conditions to really have constructive conversations?

[00:11:05] **Johnny Lake:** Great question. Great question, because people are typically afraid of these conversations and the general conversations. Early on, people's arms are acrosseed, legs are acrosseed, they're tense, they're worried. So one of the things to always create and try to maintain is a safe place. Maya Angelou says "The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned."

And so making this an inclusive conversation. So, and I tell people if everybody's head goes up and down at the same time in here you'd probably just get up and run. The fact that we think differently and see definitely is very normal. So when somebody's head goes in opposition, it's time for you to listen more closely to what that person might be saying. And so safe space is really important.

Next in my mind is relationships. Start building that relationship. Make that connection with people so that the basis for us to work together begins to be a relationship. And it's still key for teachers as well. Teacher-student relationship is one of the seminal pieces of research about how to be successful in school is building and maintaining that relationship between teacher and student.

In fact, certain scholars say that relationship is more important than the relationship which I may have at home. It's that relationship with that teacher. And so I applaud all of the teachers, because I think our society underestimates how important our teachers are. Honesty is also a characteristic of these conversations; inauthentic conversations quickly fail.

If you are not authentic and honest about these conversations, everybody knows you're posturing, and body language is more important than your words. You can talk as nice as you want to. You can talk as much as you want to. But if your body language is not in agreement, if you're actually not comfortable with this conversation, I don't care how much you talk about it, people are gonna take away that person was not comfortable about this conversation.

[00:13:03] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:13:04] **Johnny Lake:** Also the politics of race tend to, uh, intrude in these conversations. This is not a political conversation. This is an educational conversation and how many of us need education. How many of us need to learn. And we need to get on the same page with that. 'Cause there's none of us who has got the single answer. We need each other.

[00:13:24] **Rafael Otto:** You've recently started working with the school community in Yoncalla, which is here in Oregon, in Douglas county, and it's one of our programs sites for Children's Institute. And I know it's just started, but it's a small, rural, predominantly white town that is really trying to embed equity in its work in how they think about educating the students in their community.

What was that initial experience like and how do you see things developing?

[00:13:55] **Johnny Lake:** Well Rafael, this is always interesting. 'Cause I work in the rural in Oregon more than I do in the urban areas. And that always surprises people because I'm Black and they're like, "You shouldn't be going over there, 'cause that's where the racist people are." But I'm from Tennessee in a small town, country town, similar to Yoncalla.

I am actually at home more in those communities and kind of understand those communities better than I do an urban area. And so, when I told people in Eugene I was going to Yoncalla, they said, "You going where?" I said, "Yoncalla!" "For what?" I said, "To work with the schools." "Well... work with who?" Because they are assuming that I only work with Black kids.

But I tell people, I said, "Let me assure y'all something. I do pretty good work with white kids, too. So let's get that out of the way." It's not a question of people's skin color. It's a question of our skills and our ability to do this work. If you reduce your ability to work to only people that look like you walk, like you talk like you, think like you, something's might be wrong with your skills.

But going to Yoncalla, I was excited because it is a community that is mostly white, but grappling and struggling with issues around identity and race, culture. Poverty is one of those issues. This is the real world, Rafael. I tell people in a lot of our wealthy schools and our best schools that you may be disserving your children because this is not the real world, and the only place that they can actually maybe be competent is going to be in another place similar to that. But when we grapple with these issues of race, we grapple with these issues of culture, we grapple with these issues of poverty with our children and our families. Guess what we're preparing those children for?

[00:15:26] **Rafael Otto:** The real world.

[00:15:27] **Johnny Lake:** The real world. Guess who's gonna come back to Yoncalla and be leaders if we do our education right? We're going to prepare the next generation of leaders by grappling with these issues together. And so I admire the courage of Yoncalla to even invite somebody like me. But it was a wonderful

experience. I think everybody was nervous at first, but I kind of use stories to invite people into thinking about the key concepts that I want them to share or to think about.

And it's really important that we use stories. We don't just tell stories. Don't just tell stories. You use stories based on the concept that the story is helping people to understand. Like, I talk about my grandma a lot. As I mentioned to you already, she works her way into every presentation I have, whether I write her in or not, she works her way in. But I shared the story about my grandmother.

I was in Woodburn, a Latino community, had the translator and everything. So, you know, it's not supposed to be this connection. Young Latino man comes up. He says, "Dr. Lake, I got a question for you." I said, "What?" He says, "How did we have the same grandma?" Latino culture got grandmas.

I go to southern Oregon to talk to the Future Farmers of America. They got 600 kids, they got two kids of color. They told me that. And they said, "We want you to talk to us about how to diversify our group." And I'm walking up to the stage, getting ready to make my speech.

Young white man grabbed my arm. He had been in my presentation before. I didn't even know he was in this group. He grabbed my arm and pulled me down. He said, "Dr. Lake, don't forget. Tell them about your grandma." And my grandma's an old Black woman who's dead and buried in the ground in Tennessee, only went to fourth grade.

What about that old woman is relevant to a young white boy in southern Oregon. And see, this is why stories, instead of telling stories, we use stories to make those connections with other people. And everybody wants to know my grandma. If my grandma was alive she'd be famous now because everybody wants to meet. "I wish I'd got to meet your grandma."

[00:17:21] **Rafael Otto:** She is famous in a lot of ways now.

[00:17:24] **Johnny Lake:** I did the graduation speech at a community college on the coast up in Astoria. And when I walked in, I was the only Black person I saw. 700 people and everybody's nervous, and I had a great presentation about the global society, how you need to be a global citizen. You know, your education prepares you for the future, all of that stuff.

And I threw that out and I told them the story about my grandma and why I ended up getting a PhD. Got two standing ovations. The president said, "This is a tough crowd. I've never seen them give anybody a standing ovation. You got two standing ovations."

And when I came off the stage, this old man came and he shook my hand in both of his hands and he looked at me and he said, "Son, you're a great speaker," he say, "You touched my heart," and started crying because he didn't know my grandma, but who did he know? Someone like that old woman who stood behind him and helped him to be successful in his life. And so when we share our stories, we want to share those stories that make those connections. Not just tell stories. Stories are great, and we can all tell stories. But use stories to make those connections with other people.

And that's what happened in Yoncalla. When I left those people who were nervous at first, they were hugging me and wanted to take pictures with me and all of those things, and "When are you coming back?" They are still white. They're still the mostly white community. I'm still Black. What's different? And this goes all the way back to Tennessee, because I used that boy that I fought with; both students in kindergarten, first, second, third grade.

And I tell him, "Is he still white? Yes. Are you still Black? Am I still Black? Yes." And so I said, "What's different? What happened? We were fighting at first." And they said, "Well, you started liking each other." I said, "But why?" "Because you did things together. You played sports together. You went to school together."

And I said, "So for you, when you meet somebody who's different than you, what should you be trying to do? Find those ways that you connect so you can build a

relationship." And I will say for DEI work - and I tell this to corporations as well as the everyday people - relationship, relationship, relationship is the key to our success with diversity equity and inclusion work.

[00:19:23] **Rafael Otto:** Say more, because what you're talking about is so powerful. And I'm curious about then if we think about the relationship between students and teachers, very young people connecting through story and trying to get to some, you know, often very difficult discussions about race and racism.

[00:19:41] **Johnny Lake:** Yes.

[00:19:41] **Rafael Otto:** So what does that look like in the classroom, or between adults and young people?

[00:19:46] **Johnny Lake:** Silence is a voice. Silence is sometimes louder than if we say something. For many teachers who feel like they're not competent in these conversations, they will choose silence. Which gives the message to the children that what they're experiencing or what they're feeling or what they're thinking is not important.

And so when I do my class at the university, I ask them, "What's the first thing you noticed about me when I came in the room?" That'd be 30 people, 30 young adults. Nobody says Black. I says, "How many of you people noticed I was Black?" I'm the only Black professor they had there now. "How many of y'all noticed I was Black?" Only five or six kids raised their hand.

They are really nervous and worried. I said and for the rest of the students, this is probably the extent of a conversation they've had about race in their whole life. Even though they are now adults. I says, "Let me tell you something, this is really important," I said, "Do you think I knew I was Black when I got here? Are you going to surprise me when you notice? Hey, I didn't notice I was Black till somebody pointed it out? No, I knew I was Black when I got here," I said, "For the children of color in your classroom and in your school, do you think they going to know that they're Black? They're going to know." Do you think you can have different

experiences because of that on the playground, or on the bus, on the bus stop, or maybe in that neighborhood, maybe at the Fred Meyer's store, maybe in their school? They will have different experiences.

How is that child gonna trust you enough to come and share with you what their experiences are if they believe that you don't even see them? I said, "In fact, you will fail those children." And then I tell them, "This class is not the real world. How many people know that?" I said that to the group down there. This is a setup you asked me to come. They asked you to come. You showed up. I showed up. There's no children here. There's no families here. There's no school board here. There's no newspaper that's going to report on you making a mistake. So this is your chance to practice. So I expect you to be courageous in this conversation.

I expect you to push your limits. I expect you to push my limits. I expect you to push each other in this room. Because if we can do it in this arrangement, what does it predict for you when you have the real situation where you need to help a child?

[00:21:41] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:21:41] **Johnny Lake:** You will be able to do it. And I say, I'll tell you today. And it's the first day of class. I will not pass you in my class if you do not push yourself to learn how to help children. I will not send you out in the world with my stamp of approval on you - that you are prepared to do this work for children - if you cannot do it in this class.

So we're gonna challenge each other, we're gonna work together, and we're going to learn how to help children when they need us. I have students, Rafael, who leave my class, they said, "Dr. Lake, I'ma be that kind of teacher you taught me to be." I'm like, "What kind of teacher is that?" "Well, I'm gonna be that teacher that's gonna help those children that need me the most."

I was at a conference. This young person ran up and grabbed me around the waist. She was so short, I didn't couldn't even see who it was. And I said, "Who is this?" And she was one of my former students. And she says, "Dr. Lake, I got to tell you

something," She said, "I teach in Tacoma," and she said, "My class is all Black," but she says, "I'm a good teacher for them because I had you for my teacher."

[00:22:35] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah. Yeah, that's powerful.

[00:22:38] **Johnny Lake:** That's the payoff of doing this work the right way is every teacher should be able to help every child. And I tell every teacher, I say, "How many children in your class that you believe are smart? Every single one of them."

[00:22:51] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:22:51] **Johnny Lake:** And they should leave your class a little bit better than they came in there. I don't know, some of them may be just a little bit better. But every child you put your hands on should leave your class a little bit better than they came to you.

[00:23:01] **Rafael Otto:** Teachers, you know, obviously their role is so important. And then there are these underlying issues of bias that they continue to have to work with throughout their career. Talk about what that looks like.

[00:23:12] **Johnny Lake:** Always. I walk people through social cognition because all of these is built into the way we have been conditioned by the world around us. And conditioned is the right word.

[00:23:21] **Rafael Otto:** Socially and culturally right?

[00:23:22] **Johnny Lake:** Yeah, socially and culturally. So I started out, I asked how many people make assumptions. Everybody's hand goes up pretty easily.

How many people have stereotypes? Not all the hands go up. I said, "It's come on, put 'em up. Everybody put them up. We all stereotype," I said, "How many people have bias?" I said, "Come on, get them up, everybody. How many people are prejudice? Let me see hands, get them up. How many people discriminate?" I make them walk through every one of those characteristics.

And I said, "when we talk about these things, I said, don't get upset. Don't get even get defensive. Because as a human being, you're born a blank slate. Everything you got in your head, guess where it came from? That's social conditioning. We've all been conditioned to see things a certain way, to think a certain way, to feel a certain way.

So we have to be able to counter our own assumptions, stereotypes, bias, prejudice, and discrimination. Don't put it on the other person. Harvard allowed me to use some of their survey information in some of my research, and they did it here in Oregon with four high schools. And here's the subtlety - and this is for teachers especially - 'cause they asked children, *what does it take for a teacher to help you to be successful in your classroom?* And students had responses like, "Well I work hard in class because the teacher expects me to." So teacher expectation was one of the things I research.

And teacher expectations, research says that a child, if you think he's smart, Rafael, he will be smart. If you think he's not smart, guess what? He's not going to be smart. And I tell teachers it's not magic. It's really what you truly believe about that child. And then another response from students was, " I think I'm smart because my teacher thinks I'm smart. My teacher helps other students when they need it." One really simple one was the teacher stayed in the classroom when they took their break. They didn't leave. They stayed there for students. That's what that research gets at was those subtleties. And you're talking about it as biased, because I do teacher observations and teachers will spend more time on one side of the room than the other one and they don't even realize it. Teachers will spend more time talking to certain kids than they do other kids. Teachers don't notice it, but I tell them, I said, "Step out of the classroom," I said, "All you have to do is go out and count two minutes. That's all I need." They step out. I said, "Who does the teachers think is smart? Tell me right quick before the teacher gets back." And how long does it take them?

[00:25:38] **Rafael Otto:** About that long.

[00:25:39] **Johnny Lake:** Boom, boom, boom. I said, "Who does the teacher think is not smart?" Boom, boom, boom. And teacher comes back. I said, " You think our children don't watch us?"

[00:25:47] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah, they observe everything.

[00:25:50] **Johnny Lake:** Yes.

[00:25:51] **Rafael Otto:** So we're talking about these interpersonal classroom dynamics right now. And, uh, could you talk about the structural issues - a little bit bigger picture- the structural issues in our education system? When we talk about structural racism or structural problems, what are we talking about, and what does our education system need to do to change? Because it's continuing to reproduce failure.

[00:26:15] **Johnny Lake:** Yes, structural issues all around us. In fact, it's the foundation of American society. We have built a society that's married to its institution. We are trying to get away from England and the hierarchy where the top down, you know, you got a king and whatever he says goes, and you got no rights and you can't even appeal anything.

We created a society that is grounded in its institutions and education is one of those primary institutions. When people talk about social reproduction in American society, some of the scholars who were critical of American society suggest that schools actually reproduce the social hierarchy of America. If you look at any town, you can ask them where's the best school. How long does it take them to tell you?

[00:26:57] **Rafael Otto:** Not very long.

[00:26:57] **Johnny Lake:** Where is your worst school? They know that, too. I said, did you tell these children that with your mouth? Anybody come in and say, "You know, you're a better student because you go to this school than because you go to that school." That's the structural arrangement.

And if you think about stuff we talk about, like the achievement gap. I asked teachers, I said, "Anybody know any research that suggests that the color of a child's face determines whether they can learn or not?" Nobody. In fact, you won't find any research that suggests that skin color equals competency or intelligence or potential or ability.

So within that structure, it starts happening to children that first day they show up that they are being organized into who's smart. So I'll ask teachers, "What does a smart kid look like?" In fact, in my conversations, I'll tell them there was a cultural match between the school and the students we are most successful with.

Guess who we're most successful with? The kids who were most like the school culture, guess who we were least successful with? Cultural mismatch. The kids who don't match the school culture. So instead of looking at kids and thinking, we got to shape all of them into something that fits into this narrow lens of the school culture, we have to develop a multicultural context that accepts and supports and encourages all children.

I'll walk my teachers through a couple of scenarios. I said, a kid walks into a class and he's tall and he's skinny, and he's so skinny you'd think you should give him some food. And his clothes are already dirty, and ain't nobody's been to the playground. And he's in middle school. And he's... I said, in fact, you can help me finish this story.

I said, does he have a nice new backpack with school supplies? No. Did he have breakfast this morning? No. Does he have money in his pocket for school lunch? No. And when he sits down and you see the bottom of the shoes, what do you see? You don't even see socks. You just see holes and it's cold and it's wet outside.

I said, uh, does this boy have a good mother at home? And they'll say, maybe. I said, well, you know, I like your optimism, but take a look at the boy again. His clothes, are they dirty,? There's holes in the knee. There's holes in his shoes. He didn't have food today. Does he have a good mother at home?

What most people conclude? They finally say, well, probably not. I said, does he have a good father at home? Then people say, well, he probably doesn't even have a father at home. I said, does he have a good home? And they say, maybe he does. But finally they'll admit no, probably not. I said, last question: Is this little boy smart?

And it's quite an interesting conversation. "Well, maybe he is." I said, if he happens to be smart, we may take him on as a project. You might bring them a backpack, right? I got an extra backpack. I'm gonna give it to you. If you need money for lunch, come and see me. I'll get you a lunch ticket. We take that kid on as a project and we help them be successful.

And at teacher meetings and everywhere else, we brag about what we did for how many kids? So who is this bragging for? Is it about the kid or is it really about who?

[00:29:44] **Rafael Otto:** Teacher.

[00:29:46] **Johnny Lake:** That was about us. Because we are trying to navigate this system that don't serve poor kids well by helping one. And not really talking about the structural and institutional problems that happen for poor kids coming into our schools.

I asked a school, I said if a poor kid walks into your school - think about your school - and took a look around, would they believe that that school was constructed for them and families like theirs? If a kid of color walked into your school and took one look around, would they perceive that that school was constructed for them or for families like theirs?

And I said, that's how soon the child starts feeling either at home in your school or not at home in your school. And if you are someone in that school and you see those children, instead of leaving them having to struggle and try to figure out how they fit into that school, you should reach out to that child and help that child find out, figure out how they fit.

That's why being a Black educator, it's so powerful for me. When I walk through a school, guess what kind of attention I get? All kinds of attention. And the envelope is open when we start the conversation. I went to Hood River. I was in Hood River and this little boy came up and he wanted to be my helper and stuff like that. He's just cute as he could be. Little curly hair and cute. And I said, yeah, you can hang out with me and the principal allowed him to. And, uh, later that day, the principal came to me and he says, "Dr. Lake," he said, "This child is biracial. His mother is white. His father is Black. But today was the first day that he ever admitted that he was Black," and he says, "I think that's because he got to hang out with you."

Do you see how important diverse educators are? Even if we don't know it, just showing up and being there. And I was in Seattle working with Black boys up there and the Black teacher came and get me. He said, "I need you to come to my class." I said, "What do you need to come to your class for?" He says, "Just come, go with me." And so I went with him and we walked in and he says, "This is Dr. Lake." I said, "What'd you need me here for?" He says, "These kids just got through telling me they'd never met a Black man who had a PhD in their whole life."

[00:31:46] **Rafael Otto:** Right.

[00:31:47] **Johnny Lake:** And he said, "I wanted them to get a chance to meet you." And those kids were C's, D's and F's. Several of them went to college. I got pictures with them. I went back up there when they got their acceptance to college. And I got pictures with these kids who I tell you, Rafael, if it wasn't for somebody like me, interacting with those kids for about a year, I don't think they would've made it.

In fact, I went in the room where I was looking for one of them. He was on the floor, working on the computer, laying on the floor and I said, "What are you doing on the floor there?" He said, "i'm getting this homework for you." Teacher expectation, teacher expectation. And here's something too for educators to think about. Because these boys taught me some things. These were beautiful Black boys.

I mean, you see them walking down the street and you think they just got the world together. They got the crazy hair, they got the shoes, they got the clothes. In fact,

every one of them, I asked them, I said, "How many of y'all ever, ever paid a hundred dollars for a pair of shoes?" Every hand went up. I said, "How many have you ever paid a hundred dollars for a book?" No hands went up. I says, "Nah, I want you to think critically about this. You live in a society that's taught to you that you're judged and measured and valued more by what you're putting on your feet than what you're putting in your mind."

[00:32:55] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:32:56] **Johnny Lake:** That stuck with those boys. But they said something to me, Rafael, interesting that surprised me. They said, "We need more people like you." I'm like, "What do you mean, you need more people like me?" "Well, we need more black people like you." I said, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Well, when they say people of color, they're not talking about us." And this is why BIPOC and people of color and all of that oftentimes don't capture the experiences of certain kids in this American society, because we lump them all together. So BIPOC puts an Asian kid with a Black kid. Tell me the Asian kid is getting the same response from the police that the black kid is getting, or same response from the teachers, or the same discipline events, same academic outcomes.

No. And so when we lump them together, we generalize all of these different experiences. And even for the kids, which that was a surprise to me and queued me in on something really important we need to think about. We cannot lump all of these communities together and call them the same types of community, because they have such different histories, such different experiences.

[00:33:54] **Rafael Otto:** I agree. As this work is taking place, there are more and more discussions around equity and what that might look like. How do we really go deeper on that? How do we make change? And so my last question for you is to think about the future a little bit. You know, think about yourself, 30 years from now; or Oregon, 30 years from now. Right? What does that... what do you hope for? Yeah, you'll still be here telling stories about your grandmother?

[00:34:24] **Johnny Lake:** I tell kids I'm going to be in a rocking chair somewhere, and I expect you to come see me and tell me what you're doing, and I'm sure I will get some of those kids. But the future of this work, I think the future of our society.... see, education is the most powerful change agent in the history of human beings. Not the military, not religion, not the economy, none of those things have been so influential as education. If we look at the changes in our American society, especially around these issues of diversity, they have been located in educational institutions. A lot of people miss the point that there were children marching in the civil rights movement. They missed the point that these protests have happened on college campuses. So the power of education and our society has to be appreciated as critical in these conversations. A lot of my work is around educating people. And even in corporate settings, I do one little activity that just befuddles the whole room.

And you can tell people if they want to try this to send it back to Dr. Lake. I'll grade it for you.

[00:35:27] **Rafael Otto:** Okay.

[00:35:28] **Johnny Lake:** Do it at the university. I said, "We're going to have a pop quiz." They're like, "What? Pop quiz?" I said, "Yeah, it's pretty simple. I want you to define race, culture, and ethnicity, separate from each other. And you can't use one term to define the other... go. You got 15 minutes."

How many students, you think passed it at the university level? Zero.

[00:35:46] **Rafael Otto:** Zero. None.

[00:35:47] **Johnny Lake:** Zero. I give them the official definitions. And then at the midterm, I said, "Well, we're going to have a pop quiz." They said, "What is it?" I said, "You guys already know." They're like, "Oh no, we gotta do that again." I'm like, "Yes, you should be better at it this time."

The second time I did it, Rafael, one student passed not even with a hundred percent either. But one student got enough of those definitions correct. I did it with the state superintendents for the school district all around the state. None of them could do it. I said, "You're going to be leading a school district and addressing issues related to race, culture, and ethnicity. And you can't define them."

And so getting a foundation of education for all of us is essential for us to avoid these conflicts over *what does this mean? What does this mean? What are we talking about?* And equity to the privileged feels like oppression. So whenever we talk about creating equity, we've got to address the historical issues of racism, historical issues of sexism, the historical issues of poverty.

Because if we don't, then we continue to recreate the same inequities that are based in these structural and institutional frameworks. So education. I'm the first person in my family to actually get a degree. And I have a PhD. I tell you, my brothers and sisters are just as smart as I am. But the barriers they face kept... I'm pretty hard-headed, as you know. I told you I've been hard-headed since I was first, second, third, fourth, fifth grade. So I was determined to get every piece of paper that they handed out. So I was not going to stop until I finished this PhD. But if we think about equity, we can begin where we are, especially with our elementary, middle, high school students, to create that framework.

One scholar said, "Democracy is first practiced in the public school." So we teach our children how to be vital members of our democracy before they ever get out there to do it. And so we need to recognize that we are shaping citizens. We are shaping global citizens for our society, for our communities, but also for the world. Even in Yoncalla, there are children there who will affect the world.

And I tell teachers, you got to believe that you may have Einstein under your hand today, and she may only be speaking Spanish. What are you going to do with that mind that that child is presenting to you? And that means we have to hold each other accountable as well. I think equity is the right conversation if we truly committed to it. If we're not, look at the resources of those schools I just described to you - the best school in your community and the worst school in your community

- and tell me we're really practicing equity. We are not really practicing equity. If we did so, all of our children would have the resources that I realized I didn't have when I went to a white school, and all of them will end up getting a PhD like Dr. Lake.

[00:38:30] **Rafael Otto:** Johnny, I'm going to end it there. Thank you, so much. I appreciate the conversation and the stories. Great to have you on the podcast today.

[00:38:37] **Johnny Lake:** Thank you, Rafael. I appreciate the opportunity to talk about these very important issues with you, and also to work with your organization and Yoncalla. Thank you.