

# Failing by not 'acting white'

**A**s a student who took advanced placement classes throughout school, I don't think I was spared many of the smart-kid jokes.

"What's wrong with you, Bolton, you mad the library is closed?" "Bolton, you better not go to the dance tonight; your brain might overload."

I was called brainiac, school boy, you name it. Some kids didn't want me around because I "knew too much."

Truth be told, I was treated better than most smart black kids. One of the things that took some of the pressure off me is that I played sports in school. You know, stuff black kids are supposed to do. I fit in to some degree.

Yet some of my peers still made it clear that I was not like them. I did stuff white kids did: I carried books home and made good grades.

I was so bothered by it all that I decided one semester to sign up to take a class with some of the fellas. Big mistake. I found myself cutting up and not studying, just like some of the very ones who taunted me about doing well in my studies. On top of that, I made a C in the class. I never made C's.

The disappointment in my mother's voice was all it took for me to realize I had not only allowed myself to be influenced negatively but I had let her, and me, down.

Chances are that young black children who do well in school and speak grammatical English will, at some point in their lives, be accused by a black peer of "acting white."

My experiences, along with some that former Columbia, S.C., reporter Dave Moniz had heard about, led us to team up to write a two-part series about the phenomenon 10 years ago.

The first thing we wrestled with was the fact that many smart kids, no matter their race, get hassled. How-

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ever, we discovered a dark, insidious kind of peer pressure among black students that is far different from the normal taunting. We found story after story of black teen-agers deliberately doing poorly in school for fear of being accused of "acting white."

We talked with students, parents and educators in South Carolina and across the United States who revealed the ugly truth about this negative kind of peer pressure.

Dave and I told the story of one young lady, a South Carolina State student at the time, who said that "acting white" was an easy term to define during her days in high school.

Speaking grammatical English or wearing Polo clothes, plaid, shorts or button-down cotton shirts was acting white. So was listening to Bach or the Beatles. Acting white was playing clarinet in the school band, reading *Seventeen* magazine or taking advanced courses.

The biggest sign that someone was acting white? Making good grades.

She told us that after a while, she had accepted her friends' ideas about how black teen-agers should behave. In the 11th grade, she acted out. She tried to fail history, yelled at teachers and often wound up in the principal's office. She had to prove her blackness.

In another interview, another student, who was on the A honor roll, said many good black students found

it hard to fight the strong pull of peer pressure. Beyond that, white students didn't understand the dynamics at work, he said. His white classmates would tell him he was not like other blacks because he didn't hang out in the halls or listen to rap music. Apparently, that was their attempt at defining "acting black."

One of the most heartbreaking stories we heard was that of a young man in Greenville, S.C., who, during his junior year in high school, was attacked in the parking lot one day after class. Two schoolmates, whom the young man hardly knew, punched and kicked him.

S.C. Court of Appeals Judge Sam Stilwell, then a Greenville lawyer who represented one of the attackers, said his client told him the beating occurred because the other young man was "too white."

Thousands more incidents such as these occur in schools across the United States.

Success has no color, but somehow some young black children have determined that academic success is a white thing.

Education is the great equalizer. That is why it is horrifying to know that some children might actually opt to throw it away because they somehow have equated being successful with failing to be black.

African-American parents and community leaders, along with educators, must address this issue. Now is the time as we work to improve our education system.

While I agree with some of the concerns some African-Americans have with accountability efforts, if we don't demand more of students and convince them that doing well in school is OK and not "acting white," they won't do well no matter what the standards are.

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*Warren Bolton is a columnist for The State in Columbia, S.C.*