

field note

FIRST IMPRESSIONS

My first impressions of the children and their families came from the school: from what teachers and administrators said, from school records and test scores. It was a powerful, seamless story that reinforced a “natural” connection between certain groups of children and certain outcomes. The following piece is my regurgitation of the institutional narrative with its litany of “commonsense” correlations.

According to the statistics, the best-behaved children in the school are also the brightest, the most gifted. They score high on tests and participate in the program for Gifted and Talented children. A very tiny percentage of these best-behaved children are classified within school records as black. But most often, these children are racially classified white, live in nice neighborhoods, and come from homes that have separate, quiet places for them to do their homework. They arrive at the school in a bus. At recess, they mostly hang out with each other. From time to time, they are naughty in childlike ways. Occasionally, one of the boys gets into a fight or talks back and has to stay for detention. The girls, however, are models of good behavior, and no trace is found in the record of them breaking a single rule or getting out of line. All in all, these are children who resolve disagreements with others in socially appropriate ways.

According to the school people, the best-behaved children in the school, some of whom are “average achievers,” come ready to work; they know what they’re there for. When it’s time for them to listen, they listen, they raise their hand, they wait their turn. They are responsible for themselves and they get down to work. They know what is expected of them. They have a language for their feelings. Most important of all, they have self-control and can sit and listen and learn from the teacher.

According to the school people, these children are well behaved because they have parents who care about their education and oversee their homework. They have total support from home. Not only do these adults want their children to succeed, but they are role models for this success. Fathers are strong but they can show their emotions as well. They spend quality time with their sons so they can learn what it

means to be a man. Daughters are encouraged to develop all their talents and potentials. The mothers of these well-behaved children are active in school in a helpful, supportive way. They raise money for special programs, attend meetings, go on field trips, make sure the homework gets done. They respect their children's rights, but they treat them as children.

According to the statistics, the worst-behaved children in the school are black and male, and when they take tests they score way below their grade level. They eat candy, refuse to work, fight, gamble, chase, hit, instigate, cut class, cut school, cut hair. They are defiant, disruptive, disrespectful, profane. These black males fondle girls, draw obscene pictures, make lewd comments, intimidate others, and call teachers names. They are banished from the classroom to the hall, to the discipline office, to the suspension room, to the streets so that others can learn. They are suspended from one to five days. Separate files are kept recording their misdemeanors and accumulating the objects that have been confiscated from them as evidence: scraps of paper with obscene drawings of penises and tongues meeting in kisses. The drawers are crammed with the forbidden objects which these boys have brought into the school: neon pink and green water pistols, slingshots, pairs of dice, cigars.

According to the statistics, black girls are misbehaving too, though not at the same exaggerated rate. They also fight, steal, talk back to teachers, eat candy, cut class, instigate, damage school property, act disrespectful, and call other children names. But if they have the same sexual yearnings, they do not appear recorded in the statistics. They do not fondle, fantasize, or engage in sexual horseplay; though sometimes they fight with boys and get in trouble.

All of these boys and girls come from the local neighborhood and walk to school most days. That their neighborhood is not a good one is made obvious by the signs on many street corners telling drug dealers and their customers to beware because their license number is being taken.

According to the statistics, black children in the school rarely make it into the ranks of Gifted and Talented programs but are in the compensatory education or special day classes or working with resource specialists. They have poor impulse control and attention disorders. They need psychological counseling.

According to the school, these black kids need special treatment

because they lack attention at home and are always demanding it in the classroom. Their parents do not care about their education. Many live with grandparents or other relatives. Some even live in foster care. Sometimes they have fathers, but mostly not. In any case, they have no male role models. In fact they have no role models at all and efforts must be made to create relationships for them with total strangers who can teach them how to become responsible men and women. You can smell alcohol on their mothers' breath at parent conferences, relatives get belligerent on the phone, most talk a good line but never follow through. They don't show up for evening meetings, even when they are scheduled especially for their convenience. These families are always blaming others and never taking the responsibility for their own actions. The children learn this habit of blaming others, bring it to school and never take responsibility for their own behavior or failure there. Both children and parents are in need of special training programs; parents need to learn how to parent, how to discipline their kids, what to do and what not to do. Children need to learn to recognize what they are feeling and deal with those feelings in ways that involve only themselves and does not endanger others.

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