

a shift in perspective

The material presented up to now has documented the institutional practices that produce social identities of “at-risk,” troublemakers, “unsalvageables.” From this point on, I turn to look at the meaning of getting in trouble from the kids’ perspective. We change from a standpoint that features the school’s identifying practices to one where the school day is viewed from the point of view of the pupils themselves.

Children’s work of subjective identification and disidentification with school will be examined. By disidentification I mean how and why many African American boys actively distance and separate themselves from school as a desirable and authoritative object of identification while simultaneously embracing alternative subject positions as a means for becoming visible and gaining recognition in the social world.

We will explore how Schoolboys and Troublemakers actively configure self through two social identities, race and gender, to provide the social, psychic, and emotional resources for recouping a sense of self as competent and admirable in an institutional setting where they have been categorized as problems or as failures. These identities are not just arbitrarily chosen modalities of identification for self-fashioning, but are already an integral part of their lived and imaginary world that structures, constrains, and makes intelligible every facet of social life.

With this shift of focus from that of school to that of students, two aspects of this new perspective are featured. The first is what kids know and how this affects the meaning of rules and getting in trouble. Children are highly knowledgeable about teachers’ identifying practices and assessments. They are sophisticated participant observers themselves, skilled interpreters and astute analysts of social interactions, cognizant of a variety of cues that signal teachers’ expectations of children. They are aware not only of the institution’s ranking and labeling system, but of their own and other children’s position within that system. This knowledge has a marked effect on concomitant self-fashioning within

school.¹ Kids know who is deemed troubled, troubling, or troublemaking. They are influenced by these labels, but they also have their own critical perspective on the process itself.

My awareness of the acutely perceptive observational work of the children whom I interviewed has been corroborated in a series of studies that ask elementary school students for their own interpretation of classroom interactions.² They find that children as early as the first grade are conscious that there is a disparity in teachers' interactions with students. The kids recognize that teachers treat "high achievers" differently than they do those they perceive as low achievers. They notice, for instance, that low achievers receive more negative feedback and more rule-oriented behavior from teachers. Children draw on a range of verbal and nonverbal cues to make these inferences. For example, they conclude that when and how teachers called on children in class sends an implicit message about the expected performance: kids who were seen as smart were called on for the right answers because teachers expected them to know more, while low achievers were not called on often "because she knows they don't know the answer," or were called on to "give them a chance," or because "they goof off."³

I found that Troublemakers and Schoolboys also drew on an additional body of information to make judgments about what they observed. This is the local knowledge that comes from family and neighborhood to function as an interpretive screen through which the events of the school day are filtered. This knowledge is the generative matrix for an oppositional discourse about the contrasting treatment they observe and experience. It challenges the school's version of trouble as a matter of individual behavior and personal choice.

The second feature that will be systematically reviewed in the chapters to follow is the complex interaction between rule breaking and

1. Studies that examine children's internalization of teacher expectations include Casanova, "Rashomon in the Classroom"; Rist, *The Urban School*; and United States Commission on Civil Rights, *Teachers and Students: Differences in Teacher Intervention with Mexican American and Anglo Students* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1973).

2. See, for example, Donna Eder, "Ability Grouping and Students' Academic Self-Concepts: A Case Study," *Elementary School Journal* 84, no. 2 (1983); N. N. Filby and B. G. Barnett, "Student Perceptions of 'Better Readers' in Elementary Classrooms," *Elementary School Journal* 82, no. 5 (1982); Rhonda Strasberg Weinstein and Susan E. Middlestadt, "Student Perceptions of Teacher Interactions with Male High and Low Achievers," *Journal of Educational Psychology* 71, no. 1 (1979).

3. Weinstein and Middlestadt, "Student Perceptions."

processes of identification. For the Troublemakers, already categorized as prison material, academic achievement and conforming behavior as the basis for a constitution of self as smart, promising, worthy is already foreclosed. So they disidentify with school in a process that Kohl describes as “active not-learning,” the conscious effort of obviously intelligent students to expend their time and energy in the classroom actively distancing themselves from schoolwork, thereby short-circuiting the trajectory of school failure altogether.⁴ This takes place when a student has to cope with

unavoidable challenges to her or his personal and family loyalties, integrity, and identity. In such situations there are forced choices and no apparent middle ground. To agree to learn from a stranger who does not respect your integrity causes a major loss of self. The only alternative is to not-learn and reject the stranger’s world. . . . [These students are] engaged in a struggle of wills with authority, and what seemed to be at stake for them was nothing less than their pride and integrity. Most of them did not believe that they were failures or that they were inferior to students who succeeded on the school’s terms.⁵

I will elaborate on the role that racial and gender identification play in “not-learning” as Schoolboys and Troublemakers in the classrooms at Rosa Parks School confront circumstances that assault and violate family and communal bonds as well as the configuration of selfhood. We will find that a hegemonic masculinity provides the resource for refashioning a sense of self through body practices in enactments of gender power. Simultaneously, racial identification with Blackness becomes the source for a subversive, reverse discourse to recoup personal esteem.

4. Herbert Kohl, *I Won't Learn from You: The Role of Assent in Learning*, (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 1991).

5. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

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