



Bad Boys: Public School in the Making of Black Masculinity. Ann Arnett Ferguson.
Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000. 272 pp.

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The author takes us into the world of a single, urban elementary school populated by students who have already been labeled as troublemakers and future prison inmates. These labels are not assigned by outsiders but rather by insiders, teachers and administrators who have the primary responsibility of educating these students. The author goes the extra mile to win the confidence of an African American troublemaker, "Horace," and befriends him. In the process, she gives the reader a bird's-eye view of his living space and provides a clear view of Horace's life at home and at school. In the meantime, she points us toward the role schools play through certain forms of punishment that help to produce and perpetuate the troublemakers and potential inmates.

Ferguson organizes her field notes within a radical theory of education, drawn from two sources: Bowles and Gintis's Marxist theory that our society has set schools the task of reproducing the existing social hierarchy, and Michele Foucault's post-structural theory of disciplinary power that views punishment as a mechanism of social differentiation. She contrasts this theoretical framework to "the widely held liberal belief that schools are meritocratic" (p. 50).

The author's anecdotes support her theory, and she makes a strong case for changing schools so that they are more bearable for black children in general, and boys in particular. In a chapter entitled, "School Rules," Ferguson shows how easy it is for a kid to get into trouble in school. Infractions coded as disruption, defiance, or disrespect "are seen as challenging adult authority and power. Girls committed approximately 40 percent of these infractions to boys' 60 percent; the vast majority were African American" (p. 67). Baseball caps, especially when worn back to front, are a powerful issue between adults and children in the school: Caps are allowed only before and after school and during recess. Ferguson's field notes describe how Jamal's teacher called him back on his way to recess, football in hand:

He is wearing his cap pulled low on his forehead. He looks dismayed at the delay and asks how long it will be. The teacher seems furious at this question. "Don't you ever dare ask me how long I'm going to keep you or you'll be in here for the whole lunch period." He slouches to a seat. [pp. 71-72]

Just as we begin to grow weary of theoretical vocabulary, the author snaps us back to attention through this acute description of a slice of reality.



Teachers and future teachers should read Ferguson's book, and so should all of those who are still unconvinced that our schools treat children differently when they are black. A recent national study (Skiba et al. 2000) supports with quantitative data the conclusion of Ferguson's qualitative research, namely that discipline in our schools, just as traffic enforcement on our highways, tends to be based more on racial profiling than on the merits or demerits of individual behavior.

Reference Cited

Skiba, Russell J., Robert S. Michael, and Abra Carroll Nardo
2000 *The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment*. Bloomington: Indiana Education Policy Center.

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