

Professional Book Review

Ferguson, A. A. (2000). *Bad boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan. 272 pp., ISBN: 0472088491 (pbk). \$20.95

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Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity by Ann Arnett Ferguson chronicles the experiences of Black boys within the “punishing room” or in-school suspension room of a public elementary school on the West Coast of the United States and details how the experiences of these boys shape their identity. Ferguson’s concentration was an attempt to understand the issues and problems facing African American males within a public elementary school. The study is an ethnographic account of the experiences of 20 fifth- and sixth-grade African American boys over the course of two years. Ferguson’s critical approach to the struggles of African American males reveals her desire for their emancipation from the oppression of institutions such as public schools. In the introduction, she details her attempt to leave her subjectivity out of the discussion and allows her readers to “consciously participate in the critical world of interpretation” (p. 23).

One purpose of the study is to examine “the beliefs, the social relationships, and the everyday practices that give rise to a pattern in which the kids who are sent to jailhouses and dungeons in school systems across the United States are disproportionately black and male” (p. 7). After spending time as an observer in Rosa Parks Elementary, Ferguson noticed a disproportionate number of African American males being assigned to the “punishing room.” The punishing room, sometimes known as in-school suspension, is for students who misbehave. Another purpose of the study is to provide insight into the mind of a preadolescent African American boy who is struggling to find out how he fits into public school and society in general.

Ferguson describes racial inequalities and their continuous cycle. She states, “Bad Boys is a study of these two modes: how instructional norms and procedures in the field of education are used to maintain a racial order, and how images and racial myths frame how we see ourselves and others in a racial hierarchy” (p. 19). Ferguson’s perspective on African American boys is influenced by “radical schooling” theory and Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power. Radical schooling is the theory that schools are created by the dominant group and designed to perpetuate certain inequities among minorities. The dominant group has the power to make decisions that will continue the cycle of oppression among certain groups of people. Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power describes discipline as a way to classify, group, sort, rank, or evaluate students. Also, Foucault discusses how discipline can be used as a way to control students. By ranking students, Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power creates a hierarchy

among students. Using these two theories, Ferguson collects data to show how inequities continue to grow in public schools.

As a participant observer, Ferguson chose her participants, 20 fifth- and sixth-grade African American boys, by reviewing individual student discipline files, observing students within and outside of classrooms, and discussing student issues with school employees. The participants were chosen because the researcher wanted to look at a group of individuals with specific characteristics. She identified 10 of the students as “schoolboys” and 10 of the students as “troublemakers.” Ferguson selected the 20 students following an evaluation of discipline records, conversations with school personnel, and her personal observations within the school. Through observation, field notes, transcription of interviews, and primary source materials, Ferguson tells small pieces of individual student stories and connects these stories with theories on African American boys. By spending time with the students, Ferguson is able to clearly explain the perspective of an African American boy. She also consults with teachers, parents, and administrators to help get a sense of the individual school and the individual students that comprise her study. Ferguson filtered through a wealth of information to find the data most pertinent to her concerns. She arranged the book in such a way as to allow the reader to see untouched data without having the author’s interpretation within the data. For example, she did not paraphrase the data in her book but instead uses quotes to illustrate her analysis. In her analysis, Ferguson writes from the perspective of a critical race theorist and exposes the way in which an outside observer examining race would view these inequities within public schools.

In her attempt to expose a flawed public school system, Ferguson continuously expresses her displeasure with the “system” and the effects that profiling and stereotyping have upon Black males. She describes the gender issues facing Black males, issues that combine with the race issue. Ferguson is adamant that stricter discipline and tougher standards are not the solution to this growing problem. She argues for the teaching of Ebonics along with the continuation of the teaching of Standard English. She even goes to the point of stating, “The school demands the suppression of language brought home and imposes Received Standard English as the sole legitimate form of expression as well as the sign of culture, intellect, and a commitment to bettering oneself” (2000, p. 205).

As a result of her study, Ferguson concludes that public schools in the United States are designed to fail African American boys. During preadolescence, students are beginning to form their identity in relation to school and their peers. Ferguson makes the point that many African American males begin the process of disidentification during this time. Disidentification is the process of pushing away from school because of the “authoritative” nature of school while concurrently attempting to act out to gain attention (p. 97). When discussing the perspective of students, Ferguson notes their clear understanding of the biases

of teachers and the expectation level of teachers towards African American males. She also says, "They [students] are aware not only of the institution's ranking and labeling system, but of their own and other children's position within that system" (2000, p. 97). Through this understanding of the ranking and labeling system, Ferguson notes that students act in a way that reflects the expectations and views of the system and the people working within the system. Gaining an understanding of their blackness is essential to finding success within the system.

One of Ferguson's major findings can be found in her description of certain social constructions that play out every day within America's public schools. A great example of this is the fact that "three of the four punishing jobs in the school are held by African American men" (p. 42). These men are viewed by students as imposing authorities whose job is to help control the behavior of African American boys. Another social construction that Ferguson discusses is the topic of masculinity. Men have been socially constructed as a group of people who like to work with their hands, enjoy body contact, and autonomously take care of their business. If this is the social construction of males, then why do schools attempt to constrain and limit these actions? Ferguson uses the construction of masculinity and the construction of race to provide foundational evidence to support her claim that the institution of public schools continues the cycle of oppression and failure with African American males.

This book is a must-read for every teacher, administrator, and teacher educator. Ferguson's data and analysis provide a fresh way of investigating student discipline, stereotyping, and labeling. The book has changed the way in which I manage student discipline; moreover, the content opened my eyes to the continuous cycle of labeling and punishing that occurs in public schools. I hope educational researchers will peruse Ferguson's work and continue her examination of student discipline as it relates to African American boys. I fully recommend this book and hope it will compel educators to examine their disciplinary practices.