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Katherine R. Evans¹ and Jessica N. Lester²

Abstract

In this poetic piece, we seek to represent our unfolding understandings, dilemmas, and epiphanies around working within, and at times against, practices that get named school discipline, classroom management, and the day-to-day realities of “dealing” with those “troubled kids.” We focus on the ways in which disciplinary practices are often racialized, as the bodies of already targeted children are “interpreted” through a lens of pathology and criminology. The poem is presented in four sections with each section representing various voices that we have encountered in our work in public schools in a district we name the White Mountain Assimilated School District in the state of Southland.

Keywords

school discipline, Racial disproportionality, critical race theory, Poetic representation

In the following poetic piece, we seek to represent our unfolding understandings, dilemmas, and epiphanies around working within, and at times against, practices that get named school discipline, classroom management, and the day-to-day realities of “dealing” with those “troubled kids.” We focus in particular on the ways in which the disciplinary practices of some U.S. public schools are racialized, as the bodies of already targeted children are “interpreted” through a lens of pathology and criminology, and we work to interrogate the technical and taken-for-granted practices of working with children named by whitemain professionals as “troubled Black boys” and “deviant.” As we do so, we share what we have come to name *disturbing distractions*—those interactions, professional trainings, and official practices we have stood witness to that have distracted us, stopped us, troubled us, and compelled us, at times, to respond. There are four sections of the poem, each told through different voices and with their own unique cadence. The first section represents those systemic expectations for students’ behaviors. The second represents students’ voices as they question their own schooling opportunities. The third represents teachers’ conversations, both overheard and while talking to us. The fourth represents those teachers, including ourselves, who are questioning these practices. While we wrote our way to a partial knowing (Richardson, 1997), we acknowledge that there is much we cannot yet see or understand. Thus, as we share, we invite the reader to challenge our interpretation, showing us those things that we have not yet understood.

Disturbing Distractions

I. Teachers, Keep Those Kids in Line!

Left, left, left, right, left . . .
All your kids should be in line
Straight and quiet, single-file
Down the right side of the hall
Left, right, left, right
Hands should be behind their backs
Bubbles in their mouths
Don’t you let them touch that wall
Left, right, left, right
None of them should run ahead
Don’t let them roam around
You cannot leave them unattended
Left, right, left, right
Watch ‘em close where ‘ere they go
Don’t let ‘em congregate
They are not to be trusted
Left, right, left, right
Pull the bad kids out of line
Those who don’t comply

¹Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA, USA

²Washington State University, Pullman, WA, USA

Corresponding Author:

Katherine R. Evans, Education Department, Eastern Mennonite University,
1200 Park Rd, Harrisonburg, VA 22802, USA

Email: kathy.evans@emu.edu

Remind them they won't get their treat
 Left, right, left, right
 Kid, pull your pants up, get a belt
 Get that hoodie off your head
 When I talk to you, you look at me
 Left, right, left, right
 Gotta teach them how to act
 Teach them to be White
 They gotta learn how to obey
 Left, right, left, right
 Son, don't resist, don't try to fight
 It'll only make it worse
 Please, just do what you're told
 Left, right, left right
 Left, left, left, right, left . . .

II. *My School, That School*

I go to school
 In a big grey building
 With a gravel playground
 And a grey chain link fence
 With two school cops
 And everyone is safe
 Sorta
 We sit in grey desks
 And have a White teacher
 Who tells us what to do
 And I feel trapped
 Body and mind dying
 Slowly
 Day by day
 Across town
 There's a White school
 With a blue roof
 And a pretty rock garden
 And lots of green trees
 There's White money
 White power
 I ride the bus
 Past that school
 And see children playing
 Reading, writing
 Lots of smart children
 Whose body and mind
 Are free
 I wanna write in that garden
 Play on that swing
 I'm tired of grey fences
 Tired of lines
 Tired of people
 Ordering me around
 Every day

III. *Talking in the Teachers' Lounge*

How do we deal with those troubled kids?
 The ones who just won't behave
 Slow kids, angry kids
 Hyper kids, mean kids
 Too many kids, too little time
 There's only so much we can do
 Some say it's the parents' fault
 Some say it's MTV
 They're latchkey kids, no supervision
 No discipline at all
 It's up to us to teach them to behave
 It's for their (um, our) own good
 It's no wonder they cuss so much
 That's all they hear at home
 No wonder they're so violent
 I guess I would be too
 If I lived in *that* neighborhood
 On *that* street
 Have you ever been to their house?
 I heard it isn't safe
 Gunfire ringing all night long
 Drug deals on every corner
 I wouldn't step foot in that neighborhood
 It's dangerous there
 His Daddy told him to hit back
 Don't let them see you weak
 Her Mamma said don't take no shit
 Off no White woman teacher
 Daddy's in prison; Mamma's on drugs
 The apple doesn't fall far from the tree
 She stole \$200
 Because her mom is turning tricks
 He beat his teacher up
 Because his daddy's in a gang
 Easy answers, flat answers
 (Over)simplified explanations
 I believe he has potential
 She could do better if she tried
 Such sad lives, harsh lives
 At least here at school
 We can keep them safe
 But we cannot reach them all
 You know we have to maintain order
 In order for us to teach
 Children must learn now
 They can't disrespect adults
 They have to learn the Whited system
 Or face the consequence
 Tokens and tickets, suspension, expulsion
 What else are we supposed to do?
 They need us to control them

They can't control themselves
 If that looks like a prison, then so be it
 Just trying to keep them out of jail
 But few in power seem to ask
 Where did this all begin?
 Unchecked structures
 Indefinitely perpetuating
 Institutional practices that
 Target, disempower and
 Disenfranchise

IV. Critical Wonderings

What a violent, screwed up mess!
 I listened
 As a discipline "expert" barked
 Orders at both children and teachers
 Prison-like, yet declared success
 Order maintained, children controlled
 It took my breath away
 I fought
 To find my footing and regain
 Some sense of peace and clarity
 Defiance toward a system
 Characterized by oppression
 What a horrid, messed up system
 I broke
 Like a wave hitting a wall, I cried
 "I cannot do this anymore!"
 One by one, reaching for kids
 Pulling them out, away from sounds
 Of rewarded and silenced bodies
 I pulled
 And pulled but they were still stuck
 In a pipeline that carries many of our children
 At least many of *some* of our children
 Down a path toward prison
 A factory line, of sorts
 We treat
 All students the same, our
 Zero tolerance laws declare
 Standardized policies
 Mask non-standard treatment
 Given to students of color
 In our
 Cries of uniformity we
 Hide our disproportionality
 White teachers, White expectations
 Moral and intellectual superiority
 Such disturbing distractions
 What a violent, screwed up mess!

An Afterthought

Through this poetic representation, we sought to name those educational practices that perpetuate oppression in specific

and concrete ways; however, we recognize that ultimately, policy needs to change. The injustices that we have encountered, those injustices that are experienced daily by students, teachers, and others, are systemic and endemic. For example, narrow emphasis on accountability often drives teachers to take up a defensive posture against those who would threaten their own job security, leaving little emotional energy for students who have very real challenges themselves. Other teachers are so quickly swept away by the focus on curriculum-driven classrooms, with the intent to perform the role of "good teacher" as illustrated by singular test scores, that there is very little time to focus on the creativity that students bring to their classrooms. Furthermore, the incessant need to standardize education, including assessments, curriculum, and behavior, harms both students and teachers: Students are deprived of the opportunity to be their unique selves and teachers are deprived of the rich diversity that students bring to their classrooms.

In the first section of the poem, we sought to represent those systemic expectations of students and teachers by writing about the pressures of learning to behave while standing and walking in line. A particularly pervasive practice in schools, especially at the elementary and middle school levels, we frequently observed students lined up with their hands neatly tucked behind their backs so they would not touch anyone or anything and being told that they needed to pretend they had a bubble in their mouth so that they would not talk. Some argue that these lines are intended to prepare students for the prison toward which they are headed (Kupchik, 2010); but those lines also represent, in subtle ways, the act of conforming, particularly to whitemainstream culture that so often dominates the system of schooling. Students learn the White/dominant ways of sitting in their desks, White ways of dressing, and White ways of communicating. They learn that compliance to those in control may let them stay in school, stay out of jail, and keep their job, while objecting, resisting, or fighting back may land them in in-school suspension, unemployment lines, or prison, where there are more lines, lines of conformity, lines that further dismiss their individuality. These lines are ritualized moments that disrupt students' imaginations. And yet, those imaginations persist; students remain creative, often in spite of our attempts to suppress their individuality, as we attempted to portray in the second section of the poem.

Undoubtedly, these rituals of conformity are applied disproportionately to non-White students who are more likely to be subjected to zero tolerance policies and strict behavioral codes (Ferguson, 2000; Rausch & Skiba, 2006). Urban schools are positioned as needing strictly enforced regimens to maintain order, while schools with primarily White students are often allowed much more leniency in their enforcement (Kupchik, 2010). Urban schools are often provided with scripted curricula, "drill and kill" practices that construct learning as rote, structured, and militaristic; even within suburban schools, students of color are often tracked into underperforming classrooms and given scripted curricula to

follow (Ferguson, 2000). The need for structure, order, and compliance by teachers who work with Black children is often positioned as a need for safety, security, and a well-managed classroom. Section III represents comments we have heard from teachers and other adults working in schools as they seek to name, explain, and predict the lives and futures of the students they teach.

Occasionally, a teacher will talk back to the types of statements seen in Section III; other teachers, who find such statements to be disturbing, choose not to engage, but rather to simply go about their business of doing the subversive work of educating all their children. For us, we sought to speak back to, even if only to recognize and name, those practices that we viewed as disturbing and distracting, recognizing that there are countless teachers who are also speaking back daily through their commitment to teaching all children. Yet we also are learning in our daily work to “accept the dilemmas of committed confrontation with evils we cannot end. We can go forth to serve, knowing that our failure to act will not change conditions and may very well worsen them” (Bell, 1992, p. 198).

Addendum: Coming to the Work

This project began with a series of emails and phone calls, mostly expressions of frustration, disappointment, and concern with what we were witnessing as we walked the halls of schools within what we have named the White Mountain Assimilated School District where we worked as supervising teachers, school consultants, and learning “specialists.” Our poetic representation is based on our email correspondence and field notes from our everyday experiences working with children and teachers, both in and out of schools, as well as our reflective journals and many conversations around the intersections of discipline and race. As we shared our experiences with one another, we reflected on those things that disturbed us most: disciplinary disproportionality; conversations with teachers, some who acquiesce to and construct the institutional practices that lead to oppression and some who do not; those moments we have observed where violence and oppression are maintained through those systemic practices that are played out too often in the interactions between students and teachers; and our own complicity as we work within an inequitable educational system.

We orient to this project, and indeed our work in general, from a position of racial realism, taking up critical race theory (CRT) and recognizing that any work attempting to question racialized disciplinary practices and challenge the cradle to prison pipeline will be “a story less of success than of survival through an unrelenting struggle that leaves no room for giving up. We are all part of that history, and it is still unfolding” (Bell, 1992, p. 200). As a teacher educator and a former middle and high school teacher of students

with labels such as emotionally disturbed and learning disabled, I (the first author) only recently came to a place of racial realism. After years of failing to acknowledge the systemic injustices discussed above, I write with regret, but with a desire to not wallow in that regret. I write with White guilt and yet with a desire to move beyond White guilt to a place of action (Thompson, 2003). I write with a deeply embedded sense of hope that tomorrow we might learn from our history that we cannot continue to treat one another with disrespect, violence, and oppression. Yet I am also aware that roots of oppression run deep and in their hiddenness, they are difficult, if not impossible, to uproot.

As a teacher educator and consultant for K-12 schools working to include children with developmental dis/ability labels, I (the second author) write with a commitment to the children whom I have taught and who have taught me. I write, remembering the many young Black boys and girls and families who fill my afternoons and evenings, thinking often of how their bodies have already been subjected to ridicule, tracking, and Whited judgment. Informed by CRT, I do not deny the racist “reality” of the world and share Bell’s position on the permanence of racism—seeing it played out again and again in the institutionalized practices named “necessary disciplinary actions.” I draw much from the words of Bell (1992), recognizing that my “actions are not likely to lead to transcendent change and may indeed, despite our best efforts, be of more help to the system we despise than to the victims of that system whom we are trying to help” (pp. 198-199).

Although we struggled with how to write about these moments, knowing that what we write and share has consequences, we were drawn to write in an experimental form—a poetic form—recognizing that poetry can function to clarify and magnify human experiences (Hirshfield, 1997). We came to this decision out of a need to share the ways in which we experienced those moments, for as we recounted these events to each other, each recounting was a sensory experience filled with emotions of anger, regret, sadness, and complicity. Poetry, then, provided us with a unique language that could be accessed when “other modes of representation [would] not capture” what we hoped to convey (Faulkner, 2009, p. 17).

While we give particular emphasis to the intersection of discipline and race, we recognize that a multitude of systemic inequalities perpetuate and reinforce injustices in educational contexts. Furthermore, this poem is not meant to represent or characterize all teachers, students, or schools. Instead, we present some of the lessons we have learned from the places we have stood, realizing that when there is an explicit goal to pursue social justice and invite others to join in such a pursuit (Hartnett, 2003), poetry might offer one way to start such a conversation—a conversation that we hope leads to action. While we work toward systemic change, we wonder often if such change is

possible; yet we continue to imagine new possibilities for ways of interacting with students. Like Bell (1992), we recognize that

Black people will never gain full equality in this country. Even those herculean efforts we hail as successful will produce no more than temporary “peaks of progress,” short-lived victories that slide into irrelevance as racial patterns adapt in ways that maintain white dominance. This is a hard-to-accept fact that all history verifies. We must acknowledge it, not as a sign of submission, but as an act of ultimate defiance. (p. 12)

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Bios

Katherine R. Evans is an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Eastern Mennonite University, where she teaches courses in learning theory and special education. With a PhD in educational psychology and research and a certificate in qualitative research methods in education, her research interests revolve around the intersections of race, disability, and school and classroom discipline practices.

Jessica N. Lester is an assistant professor in the educational leadership and counseling psychology department at Washington State University. She holds a PhD in educational psychology and research as well as a certificate in qualitative research methods in education. Her research interests include qualitative methodologies, the social and historical construction of dis/abilities, critical notions of human learning and development, and the everyday educational experiences of Burundian children and families with refugee status.