

A Nightmare

I don't care



Early years

Some of the practitioners expected him to be a troublemaker. Had not the media and history books told them, or subtly suggested to them, that people like him are likely to be troublesome, even before the age of five? Was this assumption not in the very air they breathed?

Not that they were consciously aware they had been affected by media imagery, or by a legacy of negative stereotypes, or by the cultural contexts in which they daily moved and talked. But all the same they criticised and checked him more than they did other children, and more than was necessary. They had, they thought, to keep him under tight control.

Primary school

It slowly became clear to him, though he couldn't himself have yet voiced it like this, that he had a choice. Either he could accept the teachers' valuations of himself, as an object to be feared and controlled, or – with a sense of mounting injustice – he could resist, could assert himself, stand up for himself. He chose the latter.

To begin with, his assertiveness took the form of ignoring instructions, or complying with them only slowly. Later, it took the form of questioning, asking for reasons, challenging, disobeying. The teachers' expectations, as they saw the matter, were confirmed: indeed, he was an aggressive troublemaker, he had attitude, he was someone to be kept under tight control if at all possible.

One result of these tensions and conflicts was that he became increasingly less interested in the whole business of writing. Since no one was interested in what he said or thought, why should he bother to write? He was not only a troublemaker, his teachers could see, but not at all bright either, basically he was incapable of learning.

Lower secondary

To begin with, at secondary school, he was happy. He felt that whatever had been wrong at primary school was now behind him. But within only a few weeks things began to go wrong again. There was that day a teacher said something slightly sarcastic about him, and other kids laughed. The day he was beaten in a playground fight. The day he was badly let down by his own poor writing skills. Embarrassed about his poor writing skills, he avoided writing as much as he could. Most lessons, he maintained, were *boring*.

He began to suspect –though still he could not have voiced this – that the school didn't care about him, for it didn't recognise and include him, didn't apparently want to engage him or interest him, didn't seem to know him. Also, to his dismay, he found his parents were unwilling or unable to help him. They too didn't seem to understand what he was going through.

He did, however, feel recognition, inclusion and respect from his friends. It was his friends who made coming to school each day worthwhile. However, these friends were every bit as disenchanted with the official school system as he was himself. They too found writing a tedious chore. They too were seen as troublemakers. For they too questioned, challenged, didn't take kindly to being given instructions and orders. They too believed the school was frequently unfair. And they too were influenced, as he was, by young people a few years older than themselves, anti-school, anti-police, anti-authority.

Troubles and tensions mounted. Getting involved in fights and needing, he strongly believed, to prove his manhood by being hard, being bad – he must have respect from his peers, or life wouldn't be worth living.

Being thrown out of lessons. Detentions. Formal warnings. Various fixed-term exclusions. Eventually, he was permanently excluded from his school.

Young adult

He didn't settle at his new secondary school. He was entered for a full range of GCSEs, but missed most of the exams. He left school with minimal, indeed worthless, paper qualifications. No chance of employment. He wasn't interested in training, since so far as he could see there weren't any jobs available any way. NEET. Drifted, along with his friends, into drugs and crime. Frequently stopped by the police. Eventually, convictions and detention.

I don't care, he said, whether I live or die.

And I don't care whether anyone else does, either.

Source: slightly adapted from *Inclusive Schools, Inclusive Society* by Robin Richardson and Angela Wood, Trentham Books 1999.