

Just a Suppository

Most low-income schools are, for all intents and purposes, small, self-protective communities forced to fight daily battles against frightening odds. Too often furniture, materials, technology and environments are ancient and nonfunctional, temperatures excruciatingly hot or frigidly cold, necessary preventive programs minimal to nonexistent, and art, band, choir and gym the first courses to fall by the wayside.

Despite these less-than-perfect realities, however, there is, each year, and inside each school, a stubborn thread of self-promoting identity; a delicate strand of hopeful purpose which runs dynamically throughout the student body. It is this optimistic filament of hope which best describes the soul of a true community.

For outsiders; for “interventionists” entering low-income buildings lacking any belief in the possibility of finding positive foundations – well, it always appears a much more efficient task to detachedly identify and isolate easiest perceived deficits; a much less complicated mission to uncover, and then draw public focus to, a full-fledged, overwhelming despair. For loyal insiders, however, local neighborhood schools are not an abstract problem to be solved; they are simply a straightforward, everyday reality. Places where, despite what fund-seeking reformers point to as evidence to the contrary?

Each and every child brings hope, pride, curiosity – and guardedly private dreams.

Nevertheless, deficit and despair remain the most popular, the most advertised, and the most dramatically underscored media themes.

“*How can you work there?*” I have been asked by more than one concerned middle-class, dominant-culture friend who, safely cocooned inside his/her non-integrated, non-poor neighborhood, receives his/her understanding of low-income social issues from useful television shows like *COPS*. “*Aren’t you afraid?*”

Gangs, violence, attacks, drugs, junkies.

Sure, you’d think, by listening to (and sadly knowing only about) what mainstream journalists – privileged-world commentators who have elected to operate from deep within the pockets of ratings-dependent media corporations – select to publish:

That, absolutely awash in deficit?

Culturally-diverse, low-income, inner-city schools function only and consistently in crisis mode. However, despite the aggressively published media theme where difference inevitably equals violence: Police officers aside?

I have never seen a gun.

I have, on the other hand?

Oh my yes, quite often *heard* about them.

One memorable year, a painfully inexperienced, reform obligated principal (a woman abruptly hired to lead our largely Latino school because she spoke fluent Spanish and bragged openly of being a Chicana Who Could Still Beat You Down In A Dark Alley) spent her first year with us warning everyone that, oh my yes, undoubtedly: *gang wars were imminent*. Laboring alongside a carefully selected company of “fixer” assistants ready to share her high-voltage dedication to the theory of impending doom, hours of time and similarly lavish sums of money were spent in the tracking down of the most ominously dangerous – and most unmistakably recognized – suspects.

“Tell us again, Miss,” Latino students begged me, years later. “Tell us again how those principals kept chasing down all of the *cheros*.”

Extracted from the longer Spanish word *rancheros*, although not always used respectfully, *cheros* was generally a benign epithet. In local slang it referenced those students who originally hailed from geographic areas particular to northern Mexico and the southwestern United States; kids who tended toward a ranching attire which included tight-fitting jeans, sharply-toed boots and Western-style shirts. *Cheros* often stood out dramatically when juxtaposed against our school's typical high school student who, in those years, sported pants so baggy, and worn so low, that he or she appeared to be trying, inadequately, to climb out of a small tent.

Although visibly dissimilar?

As a whole, *cheros* were known by insiders to be atypically reserved. Often shy, modest and respectful, most of these children were reliably hardworking students. Although notably dissimilar, they were not, by even a good stretch of the imagination, likely to be leaders of a haphazard gunslinging violence. Their confusing willingness to stand out, however; their stubborn loyalty to a visible cultural disparity – inspired agonizing fear in the hearts of our reform-intending administrators.

To my students?

It was all a big joke.

Tell us again, Miss; tell us how those principals were afraid of the cheros. Tell how they kept chasing them down. As the culturally-different poor, my students knew, had, in fact, always known, what it was like to be tracked down and harassed for no other reason than difference; what it was like to be targeted simply because they stuck out.

In the small community of a school, these children understood more quickly than most the damaging effects of a harmful administrative miscalculation and its detachedly attendant bullying. They knew how blindly misguided the never-ending flow of short-sighted supervisors were, coming as they did, in modern days so “benevolently” bent to a high-stakes accountability, from outside the building, outside the neighborhood, and even outside the district. Quick-fix no-excuses reformers carrying ideas and solutions created in legislative sessions and board rooms by people living distant, privileged lives.

They knew, as well, better than anyone?

That they were under attack; that they and their schools were facing an assertive outsider targeting for stereotypical deficits that they didn't understand, believe in, or even see. “But, they'll never stop, Miss, they'll never leave us alone,” one of my more philosophical tenth graders explained to me stoically, perhaps more tellingly than she knew. “They'll just keep on telling everyone that our school can't do anything: that all we are is a suppository for the dumb kids.”