Insane Clowns and the Sad Truth
By Brent McCorvey

By the year 2050, the combined number of African Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans will be greater than the number of Caucasians in this country. (Spring, 136) This diversity, though evident among school-age children, has traditionally not been reflected in the make up of our nation’s teaching force. In fact, in 2002, less than 9% of teachers in America were non-white (Spring, 137). While some inner city school systems scramble to recruit more minority teachers, the state of America’s schools continues to draw fire from everyone from presidential hopefuls to members of the clergy. One unlikely source of criticism has been the underground rap duo Insane Clown Posse. In 1998’s Mr. Johnson’s Head, the group tells the disturbing account of a high school student who decapitates a racist history teacher. Although the song centers around a hideous act of violence, there are undertones that express changes in America and the need for diversity, sensitivity and compassion among teachers.

Insane Clown Posse was founded by Joseph Violent J Bruce and Joey Usher aka Shaggy 2 Dope in the early 1980’s. Though Bruce and Usher have never charmed their way anywhere near the top of the pop charts, their bizarre blend of shock jock hip-hop has carved out a small niche for them in the underground music scene. Known to their fans as ICP, the group explodes onto the stage wearing black wigs and white clown make up. Their music is loud and graphic, dealing with topics ranging from the evils of American capitalism to teen suicide. In the late 1990’s, a brief attempt to rise above cult status was thwarted when the Disney Corporation, who had become aware of the group’s rising popularity, pulled sponsorship for an album just six hours after its release. The
international conglomerate feared the group’s controversial themes would tarnish their image. After reading the lyrics for *Mr. Johnson’s Head*, it is little wonder why executives at Disney got nervous. The song is told from the perspective of a high school student who loses control and decapitates his teacher, stuffs his head in a book bag and carries it with him for the rest of the day. At a time when reports of violence seem to come daily from America’s schools, any song dealing with the subject in such a graphic manner is bound to cause controversy. Yet close examination of the lyrics shows a well-developed persona who somehow feels that killing the teacher will not only bring justice to his fellow students but also end years of his own personal pain. The purpose of the song is not to incite violence but rather to inform listeners of the issues that create the violence. Unlike the students that caused terror in the Columbine shootings in suburban Colorado, the persona in the ICP song does not want to harm his fellow students. His aggression is targeted at one individual, a racist history teacher named Mr. Johnson. On his own, the student may have read that Christopher Columbus’s so-called “discovery” of America began an era of pain and suffering to the indigenous inhabitants of the continent.

But Mr. Johnson teaches from an out-dated Euro centric perspective.

I can hear the teacher man talking about Columbus
He nothing but an old dead **** with a compass
Ran up on the beach and threw everybody off
And then he claimed discovery and now we all applaud

The student feels a discontinuity between what he has read and what he is learning in school. When he draws this fact to the attention of others, he is dismissed. He is intelligent and well read but his teachers ignore his point of view. The student claims that, “I’m just a nerd, I try to speak my word, and it always goes unheard.” Mr. Johnson in turn is not only unresponsive to the opinions of his student, but he is also insensitive to
their feelings. His lack of regard is evidenced by the fact that he would hang a racially
charged symbol in his classroom.

I didn’t like the ****** Mr. Johnson anyway
I sat up in his class, he hung a rebel flag
I cut the bigots head off and I stuffed it in my bag

Perhaps there are others in the class who dislike Mr. Johnson for the same reasons or
perhaps this student is the only one who has these feelings. But it is obvious that from
this student’s own tormented point of view, the killing of Mr. Johnson is somehow
justifiable.

The student in ICP’s song has many other problems besides his hatred for the teacher.
He feels lonely and neglected by his parents, his peers and his teachers. Throughout the
song he complains that no one really knows him. He may even be suicidal claiming that,
“If I died in class they would probably say they knew me.” In another line that is
particularly disturbing, the student says, “I wish somebody knew me cuz then they could
say I’m wrong but since nobody knows me, I got it going on.” This shows that there is no
one in this student’s life that cares enough to teach him right from wrong. He has been
let down by the entire system, his parents, his peers and his teachers. Ironically, this fact
is the reason why no one has connected him with the murder. By claiming that he “has it
going on” he means that he has literally gotten away with murder.

The song has an ironic final twist as the student enters Mr. Johnson’s class to find
that a substitute has arrived to take his place. Sadly, he is teaching the same message as
Mr. Johnson did. From the student’s perspective, the killing was in vain because the two
teachers are identical. The writers of the song have a two-fold purpose in ending the song
in this manner. Primarily, they wish to show the futility of murder and killing. The
student has failed to gain the attention of his peers and even after the murder; he will still be forced to listen to the same history lessons. Secondly the writers of the song wish to show that the problem is widespread. According to ICP, there are many teachers who share Mr. Johnson’s views. When one is taken away, there will soon be another to take his place.

As unsympathetic as we may feel towards Mr. Johnson, he does not deserve to be murdered and of course, ICP is not calling for all racist teachers to be immediately decapitated. But the message is clear. Teachers need to be more responsive to the feelings of students and we should realize that many times, teachers are the only positive influence a child may have in his life. Perhaps if someone had taken the time to get to know the character in the song, the murder could have been avoided. If someone had taken his opinions seriously he would not have resorted to violence.

As American teachers in the 21st century, our mission has become more difficult than perhaps any other time in history. While the government continues to push for higher standards of achievement, classrooms are becoming more racially and culturally diverse. The growing trend of school violence makes the situation even more challenging. Our responsibility is to create schools that are not only sensitive to the racial and cultural diversity that exists in this country but also safe places where students feel nurtured. We can no longer afford to ignore students simply because they are from different racial or cultural backgrounds. If we fail to reach our goals, we will not only see the disturbing trend of violence continue to increase but we will have failed to allow an entire generation to reach its full potential.
Works Cited