

Dr. King's unfulfilled dream of school integration

Written by Greg Groves and Philip Tegeler, America's Wire Writers Group
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Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. believed in the transformative power of school integration. He would be dismayed by America's present day paradox: the rapidly expanding racial diversity of our society accompanied by the increasing segregation of our urban schools.

Dr. King's commitment to school integration was ultimately animated by the desire to transform this nation into a "beloved community." His vision of the beloved community is often associated with the elements of inclusivity, interrelatedness, love, justice, compassion, responsibility, shared power, and a respect for all people. The concept of the beloved community was originally articulated by 19th century theologian-philosopher Josiah Royce. As opposed to "natural communities" which are ruled by selfishness and the destruction of others, Royce proposed that the ideal "beloved community" is ruled by loyalty and truth. Royce's theory was prominent in the curriculum of Dr. King's Alma Mater, the Boston University Theological Seminary.

In order to develop such a society, King argued that various elements within America needed to be deconstructed and altered. He once stated, "Our goal is to create a beloved community and this will require a qualitative change in our souls as well as a quantitative change in our lives."

In Dr. King's view, segregation was diametrically opposed to his ultimate goal of creating this beloved community. He once asserted, "With every ounce of our energy, we must continue to rid this nation of the incubus of segregation...This is the only way to create the beloved community." Segregation is inconsistent with a beloved community because it short-circuits any form of true interrelatedness, fragmenting Dr. King's vision of a "single garment of destiny."

Dr. King constantly talked about the evils of segregation, both in the broader social arena and in the context of K-12 education. The civil rights leader summarized his analysis of the harms of segregation in his writing, *The Ethical Demands for Integration*.

In this essay, Dr. King first distinguishes between desegregation and integration. While desegregation, he says, is the elimination of a negative, integration is the affirmative acceptance and implementation of a positive. In a desegregated society, people of different races could be physically near one another, yet spiritually oceans apart. He goes on to argue that segregation hinders human connectivity, curbs liberty, infringes upon the innate sacredness of humanity, and injures the spirit of both the segregated and segregator. He states, "It scars the soul and distorts the personality. It inflicts the segregator with a false sense of superiority while instilling the segregated with a false sense of inferiority."

Moreover, Dr. King also spoke of the evils of "de facto" school segregation because he saw the detrimental affect it had on the next generation's social interconnectedness and educational and attainment. Concerning the issue of social interconnectedness, when asked about the controversial issue of busing in a 1963 interview, King answered:

I lean towards the view that it is a very tragic thing for young people, children to grow up in association, communication with only people of their own race. Prejudices develop from the very beginning because of this. Narrow provincial views emerge because of this. I think the only way to break this kind of provincialism is to bring people together on a level of genuine

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intergroup and interpersonal living. I do not think we can afford to wait until all the problems of residential segregation are solved before we grapple with the problem of segregation in educational institutions. Therefore, I lean towards the idea that segregation must be removed from schools all over the country. For I do not think that the residential segregation must be used as an excuse for the perpetuation of segregation in educational institutions.

Dr. King also saw the academic benefits provided by integrated schools. In a speech he gave in 1968 entitled "The Other America," he stated:

In this other America, thousands of young people are deprived of an opportunity to get an adequate education. Every year, thousands finish high school reading at a 7th, 8th, and sometimes 9th grade reading level. Not because they're dumb. Not because they do not have native intelligence. But, because the schools are so inadequate, so over-crowded, so devoid of quality, so segregated – if you will – that the best of these minds never come out.

Clearly, Dr. King saw segregation as one of the root causes of the unfulfilled intellectual/academic potential of so many black children. Now that over half a century has passed since *Brown v Board*, numerous studies have confirmed that one of the best ways to improve the academic outcomes of poor minority students is to provide them with a racially and socioeconomically diverse school setting.

As we reflect on Dr. King's vision of the beloved community and the current state of education in America, one cannot help but be filled with a spirit of dissatisfaction. Schools are almost as segregated now as they were back in Dr. King's day. While accolades rightly go towards educational programs like the Harlem's Children's Zone and other reforms that improve educational outcomes for low income children in segregated schools, we imagine that Dr. King would have wanted to go further.

As groups like the National Coalition on School Diversity have demonstrated, school integration is still an achievable dream. Many school districts and inter-district programs around the country are successfully implementing school integration programs, in spite of lukewarm federal support. On this anniversary of Dr. King's birth, we should rededicate ourselves to this policy goal that was at the heart of his vision for an inclusive and just society.

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