

Truth, Reconciliation, and Healing: Acknowledging Experiences with Court-Ordered Desegregation

Efforts to document the history and experiences of children and adults who experienced desegregation are taking place nationwide. These complicated narratives of courage and struggle have important implications for modern-day school integration advocacy. Workshop participants will grapple with some difficult questions, such as: How might these experiences shape the attitudes and decisions of parents and adults, particularly in communities that underwent desegregation? What common struggles still exist for students in racially and economically diverse settings? What are some of the beliefs people hold about educational opportunity pre and post-desegregation? What losses did communities experience as a result of desegregation, and how might we go about addressing them? How do we honor these struggles as we move forward in our efforts to reduce racial, cultural, and socioeconomic isolation in schools and communities?

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Donna Bivens used Boston as an example to present a “Transitions Model,” emphasizing the importance of the transition process between segregated and integrated public education. The process itself involves what happens during the neutral zone between the former condition (segregation) and the latter (stably integrated, quality public education for all). She described a systemic framework for addressing the human aspect of desegregation, including the impact on or of individuals, the impact on relationships between individuals and communities, cultural or cross-cultural impact, and impact on or of institutions. Bivens linked the framework with persistent racial and socioeconomic issues today, highlighting the achievement gap, opportunity gap, power gap, and democracy gap.

She then presented a film, documenting voices of people impacted by busing and desegregation in Boston. In the film, individuals who were bused as children and teenagers described the chaos and trauma of busing. Racial slurs were hurled at the students while protests raged around them on the street. Students endured their commutes in constant fear of injury from those on the streets throwing rocks and other objects. One woman described how as a child she’d ducked a rock as it was thrown through her bus window, only to find that it had gone straight into the eye of the child sitting beside her. There was widespread sentiment that the desegregation efforts were unfair, as students of means found their way to private schools or integrated into suburban schools. Many expressed a desire for better resources at the students where they were located, instead of exporting the students to the resources. Now as parents, formerly bused individuals try to spare their children from the traumas of busing by avoiding the public school system altogether.

Vanessa Siddle Walker introduced herself as someone who was integrated in 6th grade, and as a result, went on to receive her doctorate from Harvard. She has chosen to teach at a desegregated school and to send her daughter to a desegregated school. Dr. Walker framed her presentation of

“The Legacy of Black Segregated Schools” as bringing together the conversations of historians and educators. The most commonly-encountered historical retelling of the era is the story of how black Americans didn’t have what they needed in public education until white Americans came in and saved them in the 1970’s with desegregation. Conceding the inequalities in facilities and resources, Dr. Walker described a revisionist history of community resilience that bettered schools for black students despite the intentions of white school boards.

Most records from black school workers were intentionally destroyed at desegregation. Georgia, however, hid its records, providing the only intact version of this important side of history. In successful black, segregated schools, students benefited from extremely caring teachers and “fessors” (principals), who demonstrated interpersonal caring (“You can be anything you want”), pedagogical caring (“If you teach and the child doesn’t learn, did you TEACH?”), and institutional caring (bands, sports, academic clubs, etc.). She described this system as a result of a highly-functional, closely intertwined professional network of connectivity across the south, including the hidden advocacy world of black educators. This black education community cried out that they must not accept a second-class integration. But ultimately, the whole professional network was disbanded, and history was re-written without their presence.

When the floor was opened for questions, audience members were visibly moved by the presentations. One spoke of his own difficult experience being integrated in a Virginia elementary school. Others spoke of the frustration of black parents who want both resources and a caring learning environment for their children, but who feel as though they have to choose one or the other. The group as a whole expressed mourning for the loss of the former professional network for black education. Over the crowd’s emotions, Dr. Walker provided an example of the current story of segregation: A white orchestra teacher denies a seat and sheet music to a black girl. When the girl exclaims that she’s half-white, the teacher explains, “That’s why I like you half as much.” The teacher continues in his job today.

The session ended with a single, vivid idea – We need to fundamentally revise our concept of desegregation, and black educators in the past had some good ideas on how.