Report on Integration and the Impact of Poverty and Cultural Barriers in Morganton City Schools

In 1963, I was among the first Black children to integrate Morganton City Schools. This journey was initially motivated by a practical need for transportation. With the opening of Mountain View Elementary School in 1958, Black families in nearby neighborhoods, including my own, requested a bus to ease the two-mile, 41-minute walk to the school. Instead of providing transportation, the white school board responded by assigning us to local white schools within walking distance, launching us into a new educational environment without any real preparation. We received a brief overview from the NAACP, but there was no official orientation to help us adjust. The white students and teachers met our arrival with visible hostility, creating a harsh and alienating experience from the start.

Early School Years

I attended Central Elementary School for grades 5 and 6 from 1963 to 1965, where Ralph Abernethy was the principal. I hated being in this environment and frequently begged my mom to let me attend Mountain View instead. In 1965, with school choice still in place for one last year, I was able to attend Mountain View for 7th grade, which felt like a relief. By then, Suburban Coach provided transportation, but after that year, school choice was no longer an option, and we had to remain in the integrated setting.

Although each year brought slight adjustments as more Black teachers and students entered the integrated schools, the environment remained uncomfortable, even through high school graduation. We faced hostility and often fought with white students, leading to suspensions. The atmosphere was never truly welcoming.

Barriers Created by Poverty

The barriers created by poverty for families in our community were significant and multifaceted:

1. **Economic Barriers:** Limited financial resources restricted access to reliable transportation, school supplies, and regular meals, affecting basic necessities and overall quality of life.

2. **Social Barriers:** Poverty often led to social exclusion, making it difficult for families to participate fully in community and school activities, creating feelings of isolation.

3. **Educational Barriers:** Without transportation, school attendance became challenging, and a lack of resources such as packed lunches affected our ability to focus and perform well academically.

4. **Nutritional Barriers:** The cost of meals was prohibitive for many families, and with no free lunch programs available, we sometimes went hungry until dinner.

5. **Health Barriers:** Limited healthcare access meant untreated illnesses that could interfere with school attendance and concentration.

6. **Occupational Barriers:** Parents in low-wage jobs had less flexibility and fewer resources to support their children's educational needs.

7. **Transportation Barriers:** With no affordable, reliable transportation, children walked long distances, often in poor weather, adding physical strain and raising safety concerns.

8. **Psychological Barriers:** Economic hardship fostered stress and anxiety, impacting both parents' and children's well-being and focus on education.

Cultural Barriers

Transitioning from classrooms led by Black teachers to those led by white teachers was traumatic. Black teachers understood our cultural background and learning styles, fostering a supportive environment. White-led classrooms, on the other hand, often held us in contempt, sometimes openly. This hostility affected our learning and self-confidence, labeling us as "slow learners" rather than acknowledging the trauma and disconnect we felt in a classroom that didn't respect our identities.

However, whenever we were enrolled in a Black teacher's class, our grades improved significantly. This pattern was consistent for me throughout my school years, though I only had access to a few Black teachers—two at the junior high level, three at the 9th Grade school (West Concord School), and three more during high school. Each time I had the opportunity to learn under a Black teacher, my grades reflected the difference. These teachers understood our struggles, respected our identities, and offered encouragement that was largely absent in white-led classrooms. The support from these teachers demonstrated the importance of cultural understanding in education and how vital it was to our academic success and self-confidence.

Psychologically, I struggled in this environment, where I constantly felt unwelcome. My solace came from places like Slades Chapel and the Mountain View Recreation Center, where I found comfort and community. I learned to swim there and even joined the swim team as the only female member. The church and local organizations offered a refuge, providing extracurricular activities like dances, talent shows, and plays where I could find acceptance and belonging.

High School Activism and Organizing

When I reached Morganton High in 1968, tensions around the treatment of Black students remained high. I had aspirations to join the cheerleading squad, inspired by my sister, who had made the team in her senior year after her class was integrated from Olive Hill High School in 1965-66. Although some Black students, including my brother and cousins, joined sports teams successfully, my class faced new barriers. None of us made the cheerleading squad, and this, along with other grievances, began to stir frustration among Black students.

After speaking with my peers, we discovered shared concerns: unequal treatment of Black athletes, disrespectful listings in yearbooks where Black staff were addressed by first names, while white staff received formal titles. In response, we organized a walk-out. We left Morganton High, gathered Black students from West Concord's 9th grade, and marched uptown to protest. Our first stop was the Burke County Courthouse, where our singing prompted the bailiff to quiet us, eventually running us off. Undeterred, we marched to the Morganton City School Board office on Avery Avenue, requesting a discussion about our grievances. Though we didn't gain an immediate audience, we received an invitation to meet later.

While rallying at Slades Chapel, the school sent W. Flemon McIntosh—a Black math teacher and former coach from Olive Hill High School, who was now at Morganton High—to intervene with us. Mr. McIntosh invited us to Green Street Presbyterian Church, where he was the pastor, to continue our organizing efforts in a structured way. Together, we created a detailed list of grievances and goals for our upcoming meeting with the school board.

Mr. McIntosh's role as a supportive educator and mentor had a profound impact on me. I'd initially failed Algebra under a white instructor, but when I later took the course with Mr. McIntosh, I passed with a B+. His encouragement and understanding of our learning styles made a powerful difference, underscoring the importance of having teachers who shared and respected our background. This experience solidified my appreciation for the teachers who understood our cultural context and the challenges we faced in an integrated setting.

The Lingering Impact of Systemic Exclusion

Growing up in Morganton during the Jim Crowe years, my family and I encountered the stark reality of systemic exclusion and cultural barriers. Despite my mother securing employment at Woolworth's downtown (1965-66), we were still not allowed to sit at the lunch counter—a reminder of the barriers imposed on us, even within spaces where we were employed. Similarly, my older sister worked as a cashier at the Ingles Grocery store

(1965-66), which at that time was right across the street from our home. Yet, proximity and employment did not grant us inclusion or acceptance.

These everyday moments left a lasting impact on us, shaping our perspectives and responses to the world around us. Many of us carry what feels like a form of PTSD from those experiences of constant rejection and exclusion. Personally, I have struggled with trusting that white colleagues genuinely care about my success or well-being. Although I've built strong friendships over time, it took many years to reach that level of comfort and trust.

This internalized sense of exclusion carried into my professional life, where I've encountered numerous, often blatant, rejections for positions I was qualified for. Even now, as the leader of Olive Hill CEDC, I face a subtle form of rejection; some individuals express an interest in supporting the organization, only to later imply that it's not worth their investment. This feels intensely personal, as they equate my identity with the organization and, by extension, its worthiness.

The cumulative effect of these experiences has shaped how I approach challenges and risks in my career. My tendency to avoid risks, while rooted in self-protection, has limited the scope of what I feel comfortable pursuing. These moments also impact how I engage with others; my directness can sometimes be perceived as harsh, yet there are times when I retreat and withhold my voice entirely. These patterns stem from layers of past trauma that have embedded themselves deeply.

The Ongoing Legacy of Systemic Barriers

The systemic barriers we faced in Morganton's early integration efforts did not simply affect individual school experiences; they shaped entire lifetimes and left generational imprints. Education, in theory, should be a pathway to empowerment and opportunity. However, when integration was implemented without adequate support or preparation, it inadvertently became a system of new constraints. These barriers have had lasting effects in multiple areas:

1. **Economic Limitations and Career Advancement:** The lack of access to welcoming, supportive educational environments often led to limited career pathways for Black students, trapping many of us in low-wage jobs or positions without upward mobility.

2. **Self-Worth and Confidence in Pursuing Opportunities:** The constant exposure to hostile environments and rejections affected self-confidence, limiting our willingness to explore new opportunities, pursue higher education, or aim for leadership roles later in life.

3. **Community Disinvestment and Intergenerational Poverty:** The perception that Black students and families were "undeserving" of investment translated into limited resources for community development, leading to long-term poverty and reduced resources for future generations.

4. **Health and Psychological Well-being:** The stress of exclusion and systemic neglect has impacted both mental and physical health, with many of us experiencing chronic health issues and PTSD-like symptoms.

5. **Lack of Representation in Decision-Making Roles:** With limited Black representation in leadership roles, policies and practices often overlooked Black community needs, creating barriers to economic and social advancement.

6. **Mistrust in Institutions:** These experiences fostered a mistrust in institutions, discouraging engagement with educational, governmental, and health systems and hindering access to potential support.

Toward a Path of Healing and Equity

Recognizing these impacts is the first step toward addressing the root causes of inequality. The legacy of systemic exclusion calls for comprehensive reforms in educational policies, community development, mental health resources, and economic opportunities. Healing from these generational wounds requires institutions and individuals to actively work toward inclusion, support, and respect for Black communities and all marginalized groups.

True equity involves not only opening doors but also creating environments where everyone feels welcome, valued, and supported. By acknowledging the long-term impacts of systemic barriers, we can better advocate for lasting changes that allow future generations to envision brighter futures, free from the weight of historical exclusion.

Conclusion

The experience of integrating Morganton City Schools highlighted the profound ways poverty and cultural barriers shaped our educational journey. Our requests for transportation went ignored, pushing us into an environment unprepared to receive us. Integration without adequate support left us vulnerable to mislabeling, isolation, and mistreatment. The response from the school board and community underscored the indifference we faced and the resilience required to advocate for change. Reflecting on this journey, it's clear that addressing economic, social, and cultural challenges is essential for true educational equity. The struggles we endured went beyond academics—they impacted our sense of self-worth, opportunities, and ultimately shaped the futures we could envision for ourselves.