

June 5, 2020

It has been an emotional week. As an educator I know the role that education plays in changing minds and hearts. Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the key origin for dismantling racial injustices would begin in the classroom with Brown vs. Board of Education. I wonder what happened in the classrooms of those white officers who have killed so many of my African-American counterparts. I wonder what they learned in their classrooms as children.

One of the saddest days of my life was the morning I awakened to the news that eight African-American parishioners were killed in a church by a nineteen year old. Did anyone ever think about his childhood? I don't mean those flag burning years. I mean those early years when he wore school pants and carried a lunch to school with the backpack that his mom helped him slip on. What did he learn? Did he play baseball or soccer? Did he watch Nickelodeon or Disney? More importantly, what did he learn? What we do know is that this young boy went to school each day under a confederate flag. All activity in this country should have stopped and paused on January 11, 2017, when Dylann Roof was sentenced to death- the youngest person ever to receive such a sentence *for a hate crime*. So now, what about those guys in blue, our dedicated officers whose commitment to "protect" and "serve" have been called into question by lives that simply appear not to matter. Did you ever imagine their childhood? Did they draw, swim, or play football. What did they learn? Did they dream of becoming police at an early age? Did they watch Law & Order, CSI, or Adam 12? More importantly, America has to ask- **What didn't they learn?**

With all due respect I am so tired of hearing folks say, "I truly believe the majority or ninety-nine percent of law enforcement officers are service oriented, with good hearts." Perhaps it's not merely a question of the heart. Police officers are Americans in uniforms! Why do we expect Americans in uniforms to be distinctly different from other Americans? Most have attended the same schools systems, were raised in the similar cultural spaces, have seen the same television shows- that often had folks of color missing in action- or subserviently in action. Why might the police officer be any different from the nurse, the loan officer, the doctor, the business owner, or most unfortunately- the teacher? It pains me to say that last one, but it's true. I imagine the visual images of the deaths of Black men have caused Americans to discover the failure of integration- yes- the failure.

American race relations have long been stagnant and America has been in denial. Child Psychologist, Erik Erikson, clearly revealed how an individual will become stagnant if they are unable to navigate through key sociocultural forces. Hence, these forces must be acknowledge in order to be rectified. This is the story of American racism. The nation never navigated through these sociocultural forces. We simply attempted to change attitudes with laws. **INTEGRATION DID NOT WORK BECAUSE WE INTEGRATED YOUTH BUT NOT CONTENT.** If racism is learned then our schools have failed to be the vehicle for change. This is the element of the system that has allowed the perpetuation of division and institutional segregation. In the face of all the African-Americans we have lost at the hands of police officers, we continue to lose millions more in the face of institutional racism. **WHAT ROLE DO OUR SCHOOLS PLAY IN DECADES OF MOUNTING RACIAL TENSIONS?**

For nearly twenty years I have taught in juvenile court classrooms disproportionately comprised of Black and Brown males. I intentionally chose this setting. In recent years, I have often heard the media maintain that Black on Black or Brown on Brown murders are the biggest factor in the deaths of these populations. I concur....sort of. In actuality, these groups are the most impacted by the failures of integration. Access to integrated content fosters an appreciation of diversity and self-esteem. I see me in the content –I see a future for me. The lack of diverse content makes some feel invisible, and they consequently begin to define themselves through other means. Thus, the impacts of racism are both external (police brutality) and internal (self-hate and self-destruction).

Consequently, I don't *solely* fault the officers we've captured on our phones for acting on a belief. It happens daily in all of our institutions. Phones are often not recording the scenes that occur in banks, or schools, or courtrooms- so we don't capture these deaths. I fault a system that failed to show positive images of my ancestors in the textbooks to these officers when they were children. I fault a system that omitted the truth about the diverse contributions of all groups to this country's fabric. Decades ago Jonathan Kozol's *Death at an Early Age* revealed the brutal consequences of racism in education. His novel captures the brutal destruction of the mind and spirit of African-American youth at the hands of a racist school system. We can't rally around the concept of "knowledge is power" and yet not hold schools accountable for the children who become racist adults. I often criticized Zora Neal Hurston and Carter G. Woodson in their opposition to integration. Now I get it- I understand the premise of their argument. The physical proximity of students does not guarantee equity or opportunity if the content reinforces racial doctrines of the past. While I celebrate integrated settings, children can be in segregated spaces embracing the truth while embracing other cultures- so long as that truth is colorful, diverse, and equitable. Just let it be the truth. These incidents reveal that too many officers- too many Americans- just don't know the truth about African-Americans.

I pray that schools will change what children are required to learn- in order to change what adults grow up to believe. This is the true seed for a new kind of flower. I hope that you will lead the nation with this initiative. This is what true INTEGRATION should look like. Thank you.

Sincerely and In Solidarity,

*Florence Abagnon*

Juvenile Court School Educator,