

# “A Call for School Diversity”: A Practical Response to the Supreme Court Decision on Race and American Schools

Nathaniel Bryan

**Abstract**—American public schools should be the place that reflects America’s diverse society. The recent Supreme Court decision to discontinue the use of race as a factor in school admission policies has caused major setbacks in America’s effort to repair its racial divide, to improve public schools, and to provide opportunities for all people, regardless of race or creed. However, educators should not allow such legal decision to hinder their ability to teach children tolerance of others in schools and classrooms in America.

**Keywords**—race, Supreme Court, injustice, racial quotas

## I. INTRODUCTION

THE resounding decision made by the Supreme Court to disband the use of race as a factor in considering school admission sent a clear message to every American citizen, regardless of ethnicity or creed, about how racially divided America yet remains. In an attempt to bring about racial harmony and equalization of educational opportunities for all through school diversification, Seattle and Louisville school districts are forced to take backward steps into America’s past by maintaining racially isolated school environments, creating a future of continuous racial segregation or disharmony among America’s schools. Unlike individuals who hold judicial power, school district officials in both districts recognize the importance of diversity in schools and are no strangers to the educational advantages of diversifying school populations.

The Supreme Court varied in their opinions to qualify or disqualify the final decision in the litigations of *Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District and Meredith vs. Jefferson County Board of Education*, causing a split vote of 5-4. On one hand, Chief Justice John Roberts, voting in favor of the decision, states, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” On the other hand, Chief Justice Anthony argues that “race may be a component of school plans designed to achieve diversity”. It is strongly suggested that such recent judicial decision, sent down as a precedent for future race and school issues, clearly promotes continuous school resegregation, overturns the promises of the *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas of 1954* (the landmark

school integration case) and more importantly, shows how America fails to recognize the many educational disparities among white children and children of color that could be corrected via attempts to diversify America’s schools. This article purports to address the above stated suggestions, in addition to highlighting three practical steps that public school institutions could apply to work beyond this detrimental Supreme Court decision.

## II. SEATTLE’S HISTORY OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

Seattle’s plan to desegregate or integrate its public school system is no new concept. This idea took its roots as early as 1954 relying totally on the rulings of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. In the early 1970’s, Seattle implemented a “bus plan for integration”—a plan created to solve Seattle’s racial issues. According to Tate (2002) [6], “In 1972, the Seattle School District launched the first phase of what became a decades-long experiment with mandatory busing to integrate its schools. Initially limited to a few thousand middle school students, by 1981 nearly 40 percent of all the district’s students were being bused for racial reasons (p. 1).” Years later, this strong attempt to diversify schools failed as a result of the outcry of many individuals who failed to support such a plan. Individuals, who opposed, declared the bus integration plan as “one of those well-intentioned social experiments that don’t work (p. 1).” However, the fight for diversity still continued.

The Seattle school district attempted another plan with the intent of diversifying its public schools. Tate (2002) highlights that the next move consisted of the birth of “magnet schools” in Seattle. Tate (2002) writes, “the [Seattle] board next tried the idea of enticing white students to minority schools by implementing “magnet programs (p.1).” This led to another disappointment and a failed event, as a result of individuals who failed to support the efforts of the school board.

Today, Seattle still attempts to diversify its schools, but experiences major roadblocks from the highest court in the land—the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court ruled, “Race can not be considered a factor in school admission processes.” One June 28, 2007, Seattle’s race-based school admission policies were placed under the microscope—a policy that pushed “racial preference”, not “racial discrimination”, for the sole purpose of school diversity.

Manuscript received July 9, 2007. Nathaniel Bryan is a doctoral student at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, S.C. USA, Phone: 1 (843) 406-3881; Email:nbryan2001@yahoo.com.

### III. LOUISVILLE'S HISTORY OF SCHOOL DESEGREGATION

For more than thirty years, Louisville school district has attempted to integrate its public schools. Faced with several challenges as Seattle public school system, Louisville school district never abandoned its mission of working toward a more integrated and culturally diverse public school system. In the early 70's, a strong demand sounded throughout Louisville for school desegregation, after many judicial hearing on race and schools. This demand created divided communities, which slowed down the progress of school desegregation. However, Louisville gains slightly some momentum in creating school population representative of diverse America.

Currently, Louisville school district must start from scratch and develop school integration plans that do not consider race as a primary factor in determining whether a student should attend a particular school. Louisville's decision to include race in school admission practices for pedagogical purposes is no longer relevant for this day and time, according to the recent Supreme Court ruling.

### IV. A SURGE OF SCHOOL RESEGREGATION

America's schools are becoming more and more segregated. This ignored and unreported issue is constantly creeping into the American public school system. Beverly Tatum, president of Spelman College, expresses her concerns for this pressing issue in American schools in her recent publication entitled *Can We Talk about Race?* (2007) she relates, "When we consider the implications of this return to segregation for today's children, both White and of color, it is easy to feel discouraged about the future of our society. We seem to be moving backwards (p. 16)." Indeed, we are moving backwards when schools are racially divided with no attempts to create school climates that support and encourage racial diversity. When schools are divided, the nation becomes divided. Such division is reflected in the way we interact with each other. In addition, such division yields decisions as the one made by the Supreme Court.

In the South, the issue of school resegregation is gaining even greater prominence and is affecting tremendously the academic progress of many students of color, especially those children of color living in low socioeconomic areas. Boger (2006) discusses this issue in detail in his published work *School Resegregation: Must the South turn back?*

Tatum (2007) [7] supports Boger's (2005) [1] idea by affirming that

"90 percent of highly segregated Black and Latino schools have high percentages of poor children; however, at most highly segregated White schools, middle-class students are in the majority (p.14)." These facts are prime reasons that America cannot loose ground in addressing the issue of school diversity.

### V. OVERTURNING THE PROMISES OF BROWN

The overarching mission of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* (1954) was to establish integrated schools in

America. According to the Brown Foundation of Educational Equality (2004), *Brown v. Board of Education* victory brought this country one step closer to living up to its democratic ideas. In other words, Brown moved America's public school system from a public school system of racial rejection to one of an attempt at racial acceptance, creating promises of hope and equal opportunities for certain historically marginalized groups. As a result of such recent decision declared by the Supreme Court, the very promises that *Brown* established were shaken and rejected. Now, this mishandling of the issue of race and schools could potentially push America toward an even greater racially divided society and cause detriment to future "cross-racial" interaction in this country, if public school educators do not seek out methods to diversify school populations.

*Brown vs. the Board of Education* paved the way for future race-based legislations and became the precedent for these legislative decisions. Therefore, it is essential to say that the legislation of *Brown* is not the only legislations that have been challenged or insulted as a result of this recent decision. Emphatically, it should be said that all race-based legislation (i.e. Affirmative Action and the University of Michigan case) were challenged. The questions now remain, "What kind of precedent is being set for future race and school legislation? Will America continue to build upon this detrimental precedent in the cases of *Parents Involved in Community Schools vs. Seattle School District* and *Meredith vs. Jefferson County Board of Education*? The decisions and promises of *Brown* should never be forgotten and definitely should never be overturned or reconsidered. These promises and decisions were responsible for the current plight of people of color in America today. One must ask, "If the hope is removed from those who are historically marginalized, what is there to look forward to?" The answer is clear—a society that will be continuously based on racial injustice.

### VI. ADVANTAGES OF SCHOOL DIVERSITY

Research has shown the advantages of a diverse school population. Amor & Rossell (2002) highlight three advantages of diverse school populations. These advantages are: (a.) an increase in student academic achievement; (b.) engagement in better race relations; and (c.) active participation in future diverse communities. When school communities are diverse, children from all socio-economic backgrounds, including low socio-economic, benefit academically. In other words, school diversity enables children of low socioeconomic background to share in those middle-class and upper class experiences. Rothstein (2006) [5] suggests that children from low-socioeconomic background would benefit greatly when social reforms are put in place, allowing them to have those essential middle class experiences. Middle class and upper class experiences consist of effective pre-school programs, extended day programs for remediation, early literacy programs, second language acquisition programs in the early grades, and extensive travel—just a few benefits to name.

Over the past years, much light has been shone on the academic achievement gap between lower class and middle class children in America. The achievement gap is exposed

through an achievement comparison between both groups, which enables the public to compare the average academic performance between lower and middle class students. When making such academic comparisons, the future does not seem bright for lower class children, who continuously fall behind academically compared to their middle class counterparts. To provide and share proof of such academic disparities, E.D. Hirsch (2006) [3] unfolds the average reading scores of white children and children of color. He states, "Over the past decades, [educators] have made little progress in bringing all social groups to a reasonable proficiency in reading comprehension. The average reading scores of Hispanics have hovered some twenty-five points below that of whites, while scores of blacks are nearly thirty points below that of whites. These drastic scores show an evident disparity between Whites and children of color. If educators attempt to diversify school environments, where everyone receives the same access to academic greatness, then such "gap" would be eliminated.

Children who attend racially diverse schools are more likely to interact positively with other ethnicities. When children are given opportunities at an early age to attend racially diverse schools, they forge partnerships with other children, without focusing on their ethnicity. These children are able to address others who may be different from them as human being until society pushes them toward racial awareness. If children's ideology about race is shaped in a positive manner very early in life, the thoughts of racism could be easily eradicated.

Children who are exposed to diverse communities also feel comfortable participating in future interracial communities. This occurs because a certain level of trust has already been established between interracial groups, anxiety levels are lowered, and thoughts of superiority or inferiority have decreased. Both interracial groups may never see themselves as equals; however, there is a mutual understanding that one's humanity dominates one's race or ethnic background.

## VII. THREE STEPS TO SCHOOL DIVERSITY

When judicial legislation prevents schools from creating and encouraging diverse environments, school leaders must take it into their own hands to address the issue of diversity in schools. Discussed below is a three-step model for school diversity (see Figure 1-1).

Step one focuses on *interracial exposure*, and is the foundational piece to this school diversity model. It holds the other steps in place and should be started in the early grades (K-3). *Interracial exposure* is exactly what it says it is—simply, exposing children to other races and cultures through a diverse academic curriculum. A diverse school curriculum encourages study and conversation about many issues, including race and diversity. An example of a strong diverse curriculum is one provided under the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Curriculums such as IB provide students experiences and other opportunities to share across races, religions and cultures. *Interracial exposure* can also be introduced through second language acquisition programs that focus on both linguistic and cultural aspects in the early grades (K-3). Early literacy program can also provide students

those multicultural experiences simply by diversifying the selection of books to which students have access.

Students need to be exposed to each other in order to dismantle the many racial prejudices and barriers that exist. As educators, it becomes our responsibility to teach students that in spite of prejudices and racial barriers that often separate them as human beings, they must be courageous enough to reach beyond those barriers to embrace change.

Students must not only receive the opportunity to be exposed to these issues but also discuss the issue of race and diversity. This, in itself, makes the curriculum come alive. Louis Menand [4] says it best. He states in his book "Reimagining Liberal Education" that "you can not teach people a virtue by requiring them to read a book about it. You can only teach a virtue by calling upon people to exercise it." The way to insure that students *exercise* their exposure is through *interracial dialogues*, which serve as step two in this school diversity model. *Interracial dialogues* are simply conversations about what students have been exposed to through the academic curriculum. These dialogues allow for visitation of America's past and a look into America's future. Considering such past and future examination, these interracial conversations may generate conflict among students. However, educators must not fear but teach students to work through these confrontational conversations in a healthy manner. Examples of *interracial dialogues* can come in the form of community forums, school forums and class forums that focus on the issue of race. Role-playing activities are also effective in enabling students to discuss the issue of race and diversity in America.

Tatum (2007), in her writings, suggests that conversations about race open unexposed wounds. When students have the opportunity to engage in "cross-racial" conversations, the true educational process begins. Students learn how unique their very own culture is and how unique someone else's culture is as well. Student must realize, through educators' example, that everybody, regardless of ethnic background, can bring something to the table of interracial harmony.

Once *interracial exposure* and *interracial dialogues* occur, the next and final step is interracial collaborative partnerships. The opportunity to engage in *interracial collaborative partnerships* entails different races working collaboratively toward change. Working together collaboratively brings down those visible walls of racial injustice and prejudices. Bringing groups together to engage in *interracial collaborative partnerships* is not always easy but it must happen. Through effective planning, this activity could heal students from their racial indifferences and give students that exposure that some of them may have never experienced. An effective example of *interracial collaborative partnership* is students partnering with other students who attend racially isolated schools to engage in collaborative activities, focusing on and brainstorming ideas on how to make school communities more diverse, without much reflection on the recent decision passed down by the Supreme Court. School diversity fairs or carnivals are also effective when planned with other racially isolated school environments.

Tatum (2007) foretells that often friendships can be established, when collaboration occurs between races. She stresses, "because of the persistence of elementary and secondary school segregation fifty years after the *Brown* decision, today's American youth have had few opportunities to interact with those racially, ethnically, or religiously different from them." Building *interracial partnerships* or friendship must become a part of what schools teach children to do. It plays a significant role in the educational process.

USA. Nathaniel Bryan also serves as an Assistant Principal in an International Baccalaureate Magnet School (Buist Academy for Advanced Studies) in Charleston, South Carolina. He spends most of his time researching and exploring areas of educational leadership, and teaching and learning.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

Summarizing the initial intents of this article, it is necessary to return to the idea that school diversity is important. It is the educational process itself. When students are deprived of diverse school communities, they become victims of educational neglect. Educational neglect is, in a sense, lacking the ability to be exposed, to engage in the dialogic process and to take part in collaborative partnerships concerning diversity. However, when students are given these opportunities to be exposed, to engage in the dialogic process and to take part in collaborative partnerships, they are prepared to become a part of this democratic society. They are prepared to break down those racial barriers that so easily separate people. They are considered in IB terms as "risk-takers", "thinker", "caring", "well-balanced" and "open-minded." Therefore, when schools are not able to use racial quotas to establish school diversity, school leaders should not hesitate to create school diversity through curricular activities, dialogues, and collaborative partnerships.

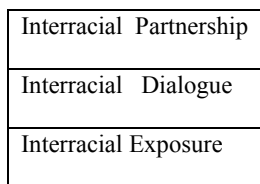


Fig. 1-1 displays the "building blocks" of the three-step school diversity model.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Boger, C. (2005). School resegregation: must the south turn back. University of North Carolina Press. Chapel Hill.
- [2] Brown Foundation of Educational Equality, Excellence and Research. (2004). *Brown vs. Board of Education: About the Case*. Retrieved July 2, 2007 from <http://brownvboard.org/summary>.
- [3] Hirsch, E. (2006) *The knowledge deficit: closing the shocking education gap for American children*. Houghton Mifflin Company, New York.
- [4] Menand, L. (1997). *Reimagining liberal education*. College Entrance Exam Board. New York, NY.
- [5] Rothstein, R. (2004). *Class and schools: using social, economic, and educational reforms to close the black-white achievement gap*. Economic Policy Institute. Washington, D.C.
- [6] Tate, C. (2002) *Busing in seattle: A well-intentioned failure*. Retrieved July 2, 2007. from <http://www.historylink.org/essays>.
- [7] Tatum, B. (2007). *Can't we talk about race ? and other conversations in an era of school resegregation*. Beacon Press. Boston, MA.

**Nathaniel Bryan** is currently a doctoral student in the Educational Leadership program at South Carolina State University in Orangeburg, South Carolina,