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Does It Matter If Schools Are Racially Integrated?

By Michel Martin
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In the landmark 1954 case Brown vs. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court declared state laws establishing separate public schools for black and white students to be unconstitutional. Across the nation, school districts scrambled to find ways to racially integrate their schools. What resulted in the years that followed included protests, violence, political and social barriers, white flight, and surprisingly few successfully integrated schools. This interview, broadcast 60 years later, discusses the impact of this case, the necessity of integration in our modern society, and what remains to be done to improve the state of American education. As you read the transcript, take note of the distinct points of view of the guests.

- [1] Sixty years ago, the historic Brown v. Board of Education ruling was supposed to level the field for all students. But some educators say we haven't made a lot of progress.

MICHEL MARTIN, HOST: I'm Michel Martin, and this is TELL ME MORE from NPR News. Let's turn now to a significant moment in the life of this nation. Tomorrow will mark 60 years since the day the Supreme Court issued its ruling in the landmark school desegregation case, Brown versus Board of Education. Advocates hoped the suit would level the playing field for all students, but it would take years of court orders, protests and, in some cases, the National Guard for some school districts to stop deliberate enforced segregation.



"Integrated classroom at Anacostia High School" is licensed under

A lot has changed in 60 years, but many educators say too many public schools are re-segregated and still failing to serve students of color. We wanted to hear more about the legacy of Brown, and we're particularly interested in whether the racial makeup of schools, whether intentional or not, still matters today. So we've gathered a diverse panel of educators with different vantage points on this. With us now are Ivory Toldson, Deputy Director of the White House initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. He's also editor-in-chief of *The Journal of Negro Education*. Welcome back, Dr. Toldson. Thank you for joining us, once again.

IVORY TOLDSON: Thanks for having me again.

- [5] **MARTIN:** Pedro Noguera is a sociologist and professor of education at New York University. Professor Noguera, welcome back to you. Thank you for coming, once again.

PEDRO NOGUERA: Thanks, Michel.

MARTIN: And Roxanna Elden teaches 10th grade writing and English at Hialeah High School in Miami. She's also author of *See Me After Class: Advice For Teachers By Teachers*. Roxanna Elden, thank you so much for joining us again.

ROXANNA ELDEN: Thank you.

MARTIN: So Professor Toldson, I'm going to start with you because most people have seen photos, you know, of troops escorting black students to school - of course the Little Rock Nine¹. Can you explain the significance of Brown v. Board nationally? I mean, what - how did African-American leaders hope schools would change?

[10] **TOLDSON:** Well, it was very significant because you have to think about it. We - there was 400 years of slavery and almost a hundred years of legal segregation. And Brown versus Board of Education was the first time the laws of this land said that it was illegal to deny an educational opportunity to someone based on race.

Now we know that a court can change the law, but it can't change the mindset. And what we found after that was some very aggressive and violent attempts to remain segregated. But we still see, today, some less of violent, but very aggressive, attempts at segregation. There's people in society right now that want a certain segregated type of system for their own students. And so, you know, through things like white flight², the independent school districts and a number of other ways in which people are trying to skew resources towards a certain segment of the population...

MARTIN: But do you see that as racial or class? Do you see the segregation as by race happens to track with class or - do you feel that it's motivated by race or class?

TOLDSON: I think there's evidence that it's a little bit of both. There's definitely a strong class element to it, but we also see where - when there's a critical mass of black people who move into a certain subdivision, irrespective of the social economic status of those black people, a lot of times there's the feeling that it's bringing the neighborhood, and thus the schools, down to a certain point. So...

MARTIN: OK. Let's hear some other voices here, and then we'll loop back to you. Professor Noguera, how do you see the legacy of Brown in today's schools?

[15] **NOGUERA:** Well, it's remarkable when you consider that President Eisenhower was willing to send federal troops into Little Rock to get that city to comply with the order - that now it's not even mentioned. The Obama administration has not mentioned this issue. And you need look no further than the nation's capital to find schools that are hyper segregated. But that's true not just in Washington, D.C., it's true in New York City. It's true in California.

1. The Little Rock Nine were a group of nine African American students who enrolled to integrate Arkansas' Little Rock Central High School in 1957 as a response to the Brown vs. Board of Education ruling. Their enrollment was followed by the Little Rock Crisis, in which the students were initially prevented from entering the racially segregated school by the actions of the Governor of Arkansas in response to extreme protest and violence from white segregationists.

2. "White flight" refers to the large-scale migration of whites from racially mixed, urban regions to more racially homogeneous suburban regions.

Ironically, the South is more integrated – has more integrated schools – than many blue states³. And I think it's a lack of political commitment, a lack of resolve. And what's very important for people to keep in mind is that when we allow schools to remain segregated by race and class, we are denying kids the learning opportunities because, as was true before the Brown, the resources go with the most affluent children. And when you – so we're not just talking about whether or not children sit together, we're talking about learning opportunities, funding, resources.

MARTIN: I just want to reemphasize what you said which is that according to – there's a – just a very new report from UCLA that says, in fact, that the South has – is the least segregated region for black students – just for people who may have questioned – in your statements – said, huh. I just wanted to sort of emphasize the point that there's a lot of data on this point.

Roxanna Elden, you went to a public high school in Chicago long after the ruling, but as a student then, and as a teacher now, what does integration look like in your classroom?

ELDEN: I think in general in education what I've seen as a teacher is that we've gone from a situation where it was very easy to identify the good guys and the bad guys to a situation that's much more complicated. During the civil rights movement you had one group of people trying to send kids to school and another group of people blocking the paths of those kids going to school. What you have now, from a teacher's perspective, is a lot of people trying to solve complicated problems but also seeing that sometimes well-meaning prescriptions have unexpected side effects.

[20] And in the re-segregated schools that both Dr. Toldson and Dr. Noguera mentioned, one big issue is teacher turnover that's much higher than the rest of the United States has. Fifty percent of teachers leave the profession within five years, but in schools that serve mostly low-income students of color, 50 percent of teachers leave within three years. So we do hear a lot about the test score achievement gap between high and low income students, but there's also a huge teacher experience gap.

MARTIN: Do you feel that – Roxanna, do you feel that the question I asked Professor Toldson earlier – which is it – is it primarily race or class that you think is dictating what you're seeing in these kinds of phenomena? What do you think is driving it?

ELDEN: I think that those two things are very hard to separate in a lot of school districts.

MARTIN: Professor Toldson, I wanted to dig into this report a little bit more.

The UCLA Civil Rights Project looks at the country's progress in addressing school desegregation. It suggests that a lot court orders forcing school desegregation have expired. So we're seeing more segregation in large metropolitan districts now. Does that matter, I mean, because one of the things that we remember in talking about why people were advocating for integration – it wasn't so much that they felt that it was important from a social standpoint, they felt educationally it was that African-American – predominantly African-American school districts were so resource deprived. I mean, these famous stories of getting books that were 10 and 20 years out of date with pages missing – that was the real issue – was leveling the playing field in terms of resources. So does that inherently⁴ – does racial – the racial re-segregation inherently matter in your opinion?

3. "Blue states" refers to states that tend to vote with the Democratic Party; predominantly those on the west coast and in the northeast of the United States.

4. **Inherently** (*adverb*): fundamentally, innately, essentially

[25] **TOLDSON:** There are some high-performing schools that are predominately black. So just the presence of a diverse student population I think is desirable, but I don't think is absolutely necessary. What's absolutely necessary is that every student, regardless of the composition of their school, gets the same amount of resources and gets the same amount of attention to the curriculum and the pedagogy that suits their needs best. So you can have a diverse school, but if you're still teaching a curriculum that undermines the experiences and the assets and strengths of the black community, then you're still going to have kids failing the Doll Test⁵. So I do think that only looking at the school racial composition is very myopic⁶, and we really have to look at the resources that these students are getting.

MARTIN: Professor Noguera, what's your take on this question?

NOGUERA: Well, I think that the resources are critical here. But we – what we need to keep in mind, we – prior to Brown, we had Plessy⁷ in place. Right? And Plessy said that it should be separate but equal. Well, we know from history, it was never equal – that when you separate, what you do is you institutionalize the notion that certain people should be kept separate by virtue of their inferiority. And what we're seeing now across the country is that as we have allowed schools to become separate, and as we've concentrated the poorest children in our – particularly our inner-city schools – is that they almost always receive an inferior education.

I think Roxanna pointed this out already that not only are teachers turning over in higher numbers, but we're seeing many kids are in schools where they don't have lab equipment, where they don't have access to teachers certified in the areas that they need to teach. They don't have access to basic learning opportunities. And when you consider the fact that now the Supreme Court has ruled that states no longer need to – are allowed to remove race as a factor in college admissions, so we have allowed the schools to become more voraciously⁸ segregated. But now we're pretending that when they apply to college that we have a level playing field. This, to me, is the greatest travesty of all.

MARTIN: So what's the right focus then? I guess the question then turns to how would you wish people to talk about this because one of the things, you know, Professor Noguera, one of the reasons we called you is that some of your work focuses on African-American and Latino boys in the educational system. And many people have reported, including us, on how they are disproportionately punished, suspended or expelled in school. And some people feel that this is a consequence of – an unintended consequence – of integration where these boys are – for reasons – for whatever reason viewed as inherently more threatening, inherently more dangerous and receive inherently, you know, repeatedly more dire consequences than other kids do for the same sort of conduct. So it's resources on the one hand, you say race and class overlap. How should we be talking about this now? Professor Noguera, I'm going to ask you to start.

5. "The Doll Test" is a reference to a psychological experiment conducted by Kenneth and Mamie Clark in the late 1930s in which children were asked questions about two dolls – which were identical except that one was black and one white – in order to determine racial attitudes. The experiment revealed internalized racism in African-American children, self-hatred that was more acute among children attending segregated schools.

6. **Myopic (adjective):** short-sighted; narrow-minded

7. Plessy vs. Ferguson was a United States Supreme Court case from 1896 that upheld the constitutionality of state laws requiring racial segregation in public facilities under the doctrine of "separate but equal" – that segregation was legal as long as facilities and resources were equal on both sides.

8. **Voraciously (adverb):** in an exceedingly eager or avid way

[30] **NOGUERA:** Well, we need to frame it around learning opportunities for all children. The boys that you mentioned who are being suspended and disciplined in disproportionate numbers, they're being denied learning opportunities in many cases in schools, but so are the kids who are confined to these schools that can't meet their needs. And, you know, we've been talking about the achievement gap for so long as a country, but we totally ignore the learning opportunities available to children – opportunities that are often determined by the neighborhoods they live in.

MARTIN: Roxanna Elden, how do you think we should be talking about this now?

ELDEN: I think that we need to – among other things – I think that we need practical and honest support for new teachers. And we need to do more to support the great teachers of the future in a way that they stay in the classroom long enough to become great.

MARTIN: What would that look like? What – Roxanna Elden, what would that look like? Yeah.

ELDEN: I think – it's – I think it's a combination of good mentorship programs – again honest, practical advice, but also working conditions that treat teacher time and energy as finite resources. There's a lot of talk of the teacher being the most important in-school factor of a child's education. But in some cases that can backfire because teachers also need working conditions that allow us to give kids the best possible education. And that means reasonable class sizes, mold free classrooms, internet and air conditioning that don't quit on us in the middle of the day, and the things that anyone would want for their child sitting in a classroom.

[35] **MARTIN:** Professor Toldson, how do you think we should be talking about this now? You started to tell us earlier when you were saying that, you know, if – even in an integrated classroom with the curriculum, if the environment doesn't suit a student's needs, then it's not a recipe for success. How do you think we should be talking about this now?

TOLDSON: Yeah, I think it should be an issue of equity across the board. We've tried forced busing⁹. We've tried forced integration. I think we need to evaluate the methods that we have used and really take a hard look at if even integrated schools are doing what we want them to do for our black children. I think the answer is no. Anytime you have a school that is 20 percent black but 50 percent of the suspensions are black, and you have the in-school segregation where the special educational program is almost all black and the honors classes are all white, then there's still a problem there.

So if all we're doing is looking at the diversity of the school, we miss a lot of very important indicators. And the civil rights data collection was just recently released – the second wave of that. And it indicates a lot of problems that we have that we need to address. We need to work on teacher equity. We need to work on curriculum equity. We need to make sure that all students have access to AP and honors classes, and we need to make sure that the discipline gap is adequately addressed.

MARTIN: So should we just stop talking about racial integration or integrated classrooms as a goal per se¹⁰? Is that the consensus that each of you has? Do you all feel that way?

9. "Forced busing" refers to the policy of busing students from one neighborhood into schools in another neighborhood in order to force racial integration. These policies were often met with much protest from white families, and in some cases, particularly in Boston in the 1970s, violence and whites fleeing to the surrounding suburban communities.

10. "In itself" (Latin)

TOLDSON: No.

[40] **MARTIN:** Professor – yeah, Professor Noguera?

NOGUERA: Not me. I would say, you know, you can't – the fact is our country is changing rapidly. Already the West and the South already the majority of children in those regions are children of color. And this country will be a nation where there is no one group in a majority by 2041.

So the real question is what's going to keep this country together? What are we going to do to ensure that this next generation of young people can live productive lives and support our economy? And if we don't provide access to quality schools and we don't provide them with the social skills to live and work together, we will become more fragmented and even more unequal than we are now.

MARTIN: Professor Toldson?

TOLDSON: I believe that it should be against the law to deny anybody an educational opportunity based on race and Brown versus the Board of Education achieved that for us. But I believe that if we stick to a narrative where we say that a predominantly black school is inherently going to be bad, and that's why we need integration, I think we're going to set ourselves up for the same type of pattern that we've seen today.

[45] I think we need great predominantly black schools. We need great integrated schools. And I think that if we fix the predominantly black schools and make them excellent, then we're going to see a natural transition in our society, as Dr. Noguera said. We're becoming more diverse anyway. So I think that some of these things will naturally fix itself. But I think the way to go is to make sure that every kid, regardless of the racial composition of their school, has access to a fair and great education.

MARTIN: Roxanna, I'm going to give you the final word. Are you optimistic or pessimistic about this? I mean, talking about all the – you've kind of painted a picture of what success would look like - each of you have basically said giving every kid a fair opportunity to succeed, giving them the conditions in which they can succeed no matter where they live, or who they are, what they look like. So Roxanna, do you mind if I put you on the spot? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about this?

ELDEN: Yes. Optimistic.

MARTIN: Because?

ELDEN: I mean, as an educator I find that I'm almost always a little bit of both, but in general, I mean, we want students to absorb the skills and values that will turn them into happy, successful, good people. And I think that they – to a certain extent – being around and learning from and working with people of other backgrounds is part of that, but I do agree with Dr. Toldson that I think that good education can happen in a variety of settings.

[50] **MARTIN:** Let me just say thank you all for your important work. A colleague of mine said that we stand for judges but sit for teachers. So you really – you can't see me. Visualize me standing for you. And thank you so much for doing this important work.

ELDEN: Thank you.

TOLDSON: Thank you.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. In no more than 3 sentences, summarize the major questions that were raised in the interview and the central ideas brought up by the guests. [RI.2]

2. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes the difference in point of view between Professor Toldson and Professor Noguera? [RI.6]
- A. Noguera believes integration is necessary for equitable education, while Toldson believes the focus should be less on integration and more on ensuring quality across all schools.
 - B. Toldson believes integration is necessary for equitable education, while Noguera believes the focus should be less on integration and more on ensuring quality across all schools.
 - C. Noguera and Toldson both believe that integration is necessary for equitable education, but Noguera feels more strongly about instituting forced integration policies than Toldson.
 - D. Noguera and Toldson both believe that integration is necessary for equitable education, but Toldson feels more strongly about instituting forced integration policies than Noguera.

3. PART B: Select TWO quotes from the text that best support the answer to Part A. [RI.1]
- A. “when there’s a critical mass of black people who move into a certain subdivision, irrespective of the social economic status of those black people, a lot of times there’s the feeling that it’s bringing the neighborhood, and thus the schools, down to a certain point.” (Toldson, Paragraph 13)
 - B. “when we allow schools to remain segregated by race and class, we are denying kids the learning opportunities because, as was true before the Brown, the resources go with the most affluent children. “ (Noguera, Paragraph 16)
 - C. “There are some high-performing schools that are predominately black. So just the presence of a diverse student population I think is desirable, but I don’t think is absolutely necessary.” (Toldson, Paragraph 25)
 - D. “we’ve been talking about the achievement gap for so long as a country, but we totally ignore the learning opportunities available to children – opportunities that are often determined by the neighborhoods they live in.” (Noguera, Paragraph 30)
 - E. “We need to work on teacher equity. We need to work on curriculum equity. We need to make sure that all students have access to AP and honors classes, and we need to make sure that the discipline gap is adequately addressed.” (Toldson, Paragraph 37)
 - F. “the real question is what’s going to keep this country together?” (Noguera, Paragraph 42)
4. PART A: What does the word “travesty” mean as it is used in paragraph 28? [RI.4]
- A. a fatal event or affair
 - B. an unfair ruling or determination
 - C. a moral statement
 - D. a false or distorted representation of something
5. PART B: Which phrase from the paragraph best supports the answer to Part A? [RI.1]
- A. “don’t have access to basic learning opportunities”
 - B. “more voraciously segregated”
 - C. “we’re pretending “
 - D. “level playing field”

Discussion Questions

Directions: *Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.*

1. Answer the question posed in the title of this interview: In your opinion, does it matter if schools are racially integrated? Consider your own school. How diverse is it? How does its level of diversity affect your education? How does it affect the education of peers who might be different than you?
2. Should school districts be forced to make their schools more integrated? Why or why not? If so, what is the best method for integration?
3. In the context of this text, what is the goal of education? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
4. In the context of this article, how has America changed over time with regard to race and education? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.
5. In the context of this article, what are the effects of prejudice and discrimination? Cite evidence from this text, your own experience, and other literature, art, or history in your answer.