

Standing for Equality: Past Voices Today

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Abstract

*This essay reflects on the use and value of *Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation*, a documentary film that captures and preserves the rich oral histories of seven African Americans from the Mason-Dixon border area of Baltimore, Maryland who attended segregated schools and lived through desegregation before and following the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v Board of Education* ruling. As a teaching tool, *Voices of Baltimore* is intended to engage students and adults in thoughtful discussion and critical analysis of the complex social, cultural, and political forces surrounding legal segregation and how they are reflected in schools and society today. The work is a multi-dimensional research project that has many uses beyond preserving these invaluable stories. In addition to the film three K-12 curriculum guidebooks are available for elementary, middle and high schools, as well one for the university level to pre-service and in-service teachers, schools and universities, community members and others to learn more about Baltimore figures where the norms were in conflict with the very nature of democracy.*

Keywords: *Voices of Baltimore, segregation, desegregation, teacher education, community*

In concluding this special issue, I wanted to share reflections on the development, value and use of *Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation* (Homana, McDermott, & CampbellJones, 2017), a free educational resource. As a primary resource document, *Voices of Baltimore* captures and preserves the rich oral histories of seven African Americans from the Mason-Dixon border area of Baltimore, Maryland who attended segregated schools and lived through desegregation before and following the 1954 Supreme Court *Brown v Board of Education* ruling. These stories, of witnesses who never expected that their lives would become a testament of resilience and an enduring legacy against oppression, speak volumes about how our nation can become a more tolerant and equitable society. At the same time, while our society has become more ethnically and racially diverse, inequalities persist, including increased school segregation and poverty.

The intention of the project is to contribute, not only to local communities, but the nation's ability to understand, address, and engage in social change, especially in high poverty and culturally linguistically diverse schools so that all children have an opportunity to achieve their dreams and become the very best that they can be in our increasingly pluralistic society. It provides a platform to understand not just the lives and stories, but something much more—how the experiences intertwine and reflect, despite deep historical prejudice, both the individual's personal integrity and moral imagination, as well as the ways that strong family supports and cultural and religious institutions enabled them to maintain the resilience necessary to achieve equality and dignity. *Voices of Baltimore* serves to honor not only the lives of our film participants, but of those who came before—and their lived struggles for rights as human beings. It asks the question, *Where have we been, and*

where are we going?—which is so timely today. The documentary film and K-12, middle, high school and university curriculum guidebooks are available at no cost to pre-service and in-service teachers, schools and universities, community members and others to learn more about Baltimore figures where the norms were in conflict with the very nature of democracy.

Theoretical Perspectives Underlying the Project

The full-length documentary film presents four themes that emerged from the larger narrative across the stories of living in segregated Jim Crow Baltimore. These themes include 1) answering the call to civil rights, 2) the insular nature of segregated communities, 3) expectations and responsibilities greater than the self, and 4) reflections on desegregation and inequality within the context of society today. The dialogue from the unscripted interviews, which flowed from a discussion between the interviewee and film narrator, Dr. Franklin Campbell Jones, began with the initial open-ended prompt, “Share with us your experiences growing up during the era of legal segregation.” Using qualitative techniques, including coding language to analyze the transcripts, consistencies emerged across the seven personal stories (interviews). Two of the filmmakers (Homana and McDermott) triangulated coding arriving at similar, yet independent thematic conclusions. Additionally, the themes were validated via a check-in process with the film participants.

The narratives in *Voices of Baltimore* reflect the perspective of “critical incidents” espoused by Goodson (1992, p. 118) occurring at various points across the life continuum—creating themes embodied in the “life perspective” (1992, p. 118). From this perspective, the narratives reflect the intersection of both life and societal history illuminating the “choices, contingencies and options open to the individual” (p. 118). The critical incidents shared by the film participants reveal much about the personal conflicts, role of family and community, high expectations for success, and the responsibility beyond oneself.

Although focused on Baltimore, reaction to the film by viewers nationally suggest that these stories reflect and represent countless lives and experiences across the country—making the film both unique and shared. Grumet argues that because perceptions of the self, others and the world are shaped by personal and social discourses they do not lead to fixed notions of voice (in Pinar et al., 1995). Rather, through these interactions

We have begun to hear our multiple voices within the contexts of our sustained collaboration, and thus recognized that ‘finding voices’ is not a definitive event but rather a continuous and relational process (p. 525).

This notion supports the argument that although inherently personal, the autobiography is not experienced or re-told in isolation. Rather, the self is always in relationship to others across a range of both unique contexts and experiences.

Voices of Baltimore is intended to help deconstruct the narrative of Jim Crow segregation relevant to Black life in America during the mid-20th century. As we move forward as a country, especially in our current political and cultural environment, it is critical to understand and address the historical and contemporary relevance of the persistence of inequity in our schools and society. What follows is a short overview of the four sections of the film and the value they may serve as teaching tools.

Answering the Call to Civil Rights: “Making a Way Where There Ain’t no Way”

Voices of Baltimore reveals that living through and breaking the barriers erected under Jim Crow America took on many forms in the lives of the participants. For example, prior to the 1954 *Brown v Board of Education* ruling students were “selected to attend the White schools—the girls would go to Eastern and the boys to City or Poly” (Welch, P.). The decision was made by school administrators based on the students’ ability to compete in the White schools, without the permission of their parents.

At the same time, another witness (Gill, F.) said about her school, “I felt comfortable, I felt attractive. It was a school where there were people like me.” Black schools were places where students were supported and encouraged by their teachers to learn and succeed as opposed to the White schools, as one witness expressed, when she was

Introduced to another world, and it’s different from my own comfortable world. And it’s there that I met teachers who didn’t think I should be smart and do well. I learned that it was just the opposite. You’re not as smart as the rest of these children in this school. (Welch, P.)

School desegregation in Baltimore, as across the nation, also meant confrontation with angry protesters who wanted to maintain “separate but equal”. One witness, who integrated the highly respected Poly Technic Institute, noted that they were “mostly white mothers because the men were at work. You know, it was get them out of our schools. We don’t want them in our schools, “separate but equal”. It was horrible.” (Gill, W.)

Despite the obstacles, the film participants were insistent that how one lived one’s life made a difference. With strong influence from their families, teachers and neighbors they developed a resilience and determination to oppose inequality and injustice. There are countless stories shared by the *Voices of Baltimore* participants’ social activism for change that reflect a deeply ingrained commitment to the call for equal rights. For all of the film participants, the responsibility to defend human dignity and equal representation was not to be ignored.

Insulation/Isolation: The Insular Nature of Segregated Communities

In Baltimore, African Americans were mostly restricted to their Black neighborhoods by geographical barriers as noted by the participants:

Schools were not integrated. There were Black schools—schools only Black children went. And so I only had Black teachers. I never had the experience of White teachers. So everything was, you know—nothing was mixed. I know we might not have had a lot of things going on in school that maybe White schools had but we were all together. We went to the Y. The Y was, you know, for Blacks. It was something we used to do. And we knew what we could and could not do. And go and could not go. (Gill, F.)

You were kept there in that neighborhood by, not necessarily because your parents kept you there, but because there was no place else to go—there was an obvious barrier. (Bell, R.)

Similar to America today, the film participants shared embedded hatred and racism:

Outside of our two streets it was scary. It could be very scary because you could be threatened at any moment. There were cross burnings and KKK might have been written at the end of the block—it could be very, very scary. (Chatmon, E.)

So I knew—not far from where we lived, around the corner—which is now Guilford—we used to walk through there, but you weren't welcome. You would move quickly because you really weren't supposed to be there. (Welch, P.)

At the same time, according to the film participants, legalized segregation ended up creating supportive and thriving communities:

“They went to their own schools, families shopped at the same stores, people went to the same movie theaters and churches—all within the same neighborhoods.” (Gill, W.)

Everything was separate. But the interesting thing—I think it was because my family, my family's friends, the community, church members, neighbors, made sure that we were able to do as many things as we possibly could. We never felt disenfranchised. (Green Washington, T.)

Although Jim Crow segregated African Americans into isolated communities they also instilled determination, resilience and the responsibility to demand equality. These both served to buffer the residents from danger, while simultaneously fostering expectations for success and support for those coming up after them.

Expectations: The Responsibility Greater Than Yourself – The Obligation

A common theme shared by the film participants was the responsibility to represent the race and become “pioneers of possibility” (Homana, McDermott, & CampbellJones, 2017). Excelling academically was central and promoted across the community:

Mediocrity was not acceptable, only excellence. (Green Washington, T.)

All of the teachers instilled in us that we had to be twice as good. There was a great sense of pride in what we did, in who we were and people just motivated you. And you not only got it in school, you got in in the community. (Chatmon, E.)

So that was what I grew up in. A neighborhood of people expecting that I would do the right thing, and that I would go to school, and that I would be smart. And, I was going to be somebody. (Welch, P.)

The teachers were determined that you are going to learn something because they knew when you finish those 12 years, that you're going to be out there in that world and you're going to be facing some problems that you're not prepared for. (Diggs, L.)

Then and Now: Where We've Been, Where We're Going

Recent Black Lives Matter protests—fueled by the murder of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor and too many others—reflect activism among generations of individuals who have come together to challenge injustice and the new Jim Crow laws emerging across the country. Today, persistent policies and institutional practices have resulted in challenges related to under-resourced and increasingly segregated schools; quality health care and housing; food deserts; restricted voting rights; and unacceptable increases in unemployment, poverty and mass incarceration. The film participants reflected on these societal challenges, including the rise of racism:

You would've thought that you wouldn't have to fight certain battles again, but we are now looking at a situation where race, as a factor—a negative factor—is again raising its head. Racism in this country is becoming much more tolerant. But the truth of the matter is, the only way you're really going to get to the bottom of it is by confronting it. And the reason the White teachers don't have to, is because of White privilege. That's it. So somebody's got to challenge it. (Bell, R.)

It is a very, very different world from the world I grew up in, where the community was behind you, where in your schools everybody looked like you and those teachers knew that in order for you to succeed in society you had to really be good. (Chatmon, E.)

Rather than accepting the common narrative promoted across the country that desegregation was a solution to the nation's problems, the film participants clarified the reality that needs to be taught and addressed in schools and society:

What happened unfortunately is, integration has had its own problems, so-called integration. I mean it was never complete, but once you've got to the point where [segregation] was no longer illegal, then there was no need to talk about the issues. So what happens? People start going back to doing the same things they did before. (Bell, R.)

The problem was not so much integration, but how it was mismanaged. You don't make change like that. You get people ready for change, you do education for Black people, for White people. You don't just throw people together who have historically believed that they were better than us and then expect a different result, you're not going to get a different result. So, I regret that integration occurred in the way it occurred because the way it occurred was so unhealthy and so wrong. And, a great part of that had to do with the resentment. (Chatmon, E.)

At the same time, all of the participants are committed to ensuring change. Reflecting a determination for justice and dedicating their lives to teach, serve and inspire—especially for young people. For example:

I think there is a great need to help young people feel that they are capable, that they do have what it takes to do whatever it is they want to do. I really feel we need to take a greater look at what we're doing with very young children to help them to get to the place where they need to be. (Washington, T.)

I've been doing this volunteer work for over 25 years now. I give bus tours trying to attract children to go through these communities—just share history. And this old church that I discovered that was falling down no bigger than a large log cabin—converted it to Diggs-Johnson Museum, where I could really share history with children. (Diggs, L.)

I still feel compelled and I am so serious. I still feel I have to make sure that students in schools learn from people who understand who they are. And, yes, I would love to be in a clean environment in a wonderful school where the roof doesn't leak and it's cool and it's clean and orderly, but I need to make sure that students are known to their teachers. (Welch, P.)

Moving Forward: A Philosophy of Teaching for Social Change

Teaching and learning for social change is grounded within an understanding of the multiple perspectives that have shaped the values, goals, and conflicts of educational opportunities in our pluralistic society. Powerful teaching strengthens students' abilities to not only understand the effect of various forces on education and society, but to also examine the impact of these forces on their own lives as both human beings and future educators.

Key characteristics for this philosophy of teaching include: fostering meaningful learning that builds on and enhances academic knowledge and civic and social responsibility; creating cooperative and collaborative experiences where students share in decision-making processes; developing mutual respect through supportive interactions; and promoting learning opportunities for students to become reflective, thoughtful, creative, and critically engaged learners. These characteristics serve as the foundation for in-depth discussions, dialogues and deliberations where students not only explore various educational and societal issues, but also examine the impact of these issues on their own lives.

This approach to teaching is also an integral part of the generative social and cultural practices that promote learning over time. As students are immersed in the learning process they begin to explore and understand how to make meaning out of their lives and the world—that is, how as a member of a learning community people interact to sustain mutual agreement on issues that are important to them. Through this process students identify, share, and develop a context for learning that becomes transformational—for the individual and the learning community.

Embracing the value of normative structures and cultures that shape cognitive skills associated with learning is central to the approach. Often, teaching and learning primarily focus on the formal curriculum. The normative structures, however, are just as important, if not more important, than the formal curriculum. Therefore, it is critical to emphasize a positive conceptualization of learning based on healthy norms of behavior, expectations, attitudes, and actions across various contexts, as well as the social processes, so that students are better prepared to fully participate as informed and active citizens.

Teaching for social justice and social change should afford students the opportunity to actively engage with one another in ways that foster understandings of how cultural perspectives and social issues are shaped by the values and conflicts within classrooms, schools and neighborhoods. Teaching for this purpose can help to deconstruct these forces and to strengthen students' abilities to not only understand and respect diverse cultural issues, but also to examine the impact that they have on their own lives as individuals and as members of a community. In this way, teaching that

welcomes and supports diverse opinions and viewpoints plays a vital role in preparing students to develop and sustain the possibilities for democratic and socially just schools and communities.

Voices of Baltimore: Use in Schools and the Community

As a teaching tool, *Voices of Baltimore* is intended to engage students and adults in thoughtful discussion and critical analysis of the complex social, cultural, and political forces surrounding legal segregation and how they are reflected in schools and society today. The work is a multi-dimensional research project that has many uses beyond preserving these invaluable stories. For example, three K-12 curriculum guidebooks are available for elementary, middle and high schools (Vandiver, 2018), and a university level guidebook (McNulty & Homana, 2018). The material is available for students, teachers, and members of the community as a way for them to engage in deconstructing the narratives so that they better understand and address the historical and contemporary relevance of the inequality in schools and society. The guidebooks and full-length film are available free to the public at www.voicesofbaltimore.com. The website also includes a link to the film trailer, and information on upcoming events, the film participants, and film clips of additional others who lived through Jim Crow in Baltimore.

Exploring the new curriculum guidebook created for *Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation*, provides the opportunity for users to:

- Make connections between past and present, between local and global, individual and group: Past-present: Looks at the issue historically and in contemporary settings. Local-global: Compare how the desegregation movement of Baltimore with national and global efforts to fight the same systemic oppression. Individual-systemic: Examining institutionalized racism and systemic forms of oppression experiences at individual level.
- Critically re-examine the past and historical narratives and how they affect our individual perspectives and larger social paradigm. How can critical narrative discourse disrupt the prevailing paradigm?
- Consider actions to shape current and future policies

The intent of the project is to provide the participants with new ways to think and engage in and about these issues so that they can utilize different approaches to teaching.

Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation is framed against the issues raised by Michelle Alexander (2012) in *The New Jim Crow*. Underlying all teaching should be a focus on developing tolerance, respect, cooperation and the ability to understand others points of views. This project is designed to use the film in conjunction with the new curriculum guide(s) to enhance the teaching of the struggle for civil and human rights. The following questions are examined in our film and broadly guide the work:

- What counts as educational opportunity, for whom has it improved over the past 60 years, for whom has it not improved, and with what sustainability and potential for the future?
- How has desegregation affected the types of collective or individual opportunities people of color have in making public decisions that contribute to the wellbeing of their communities?

- How can a complex and critical analysis of the effects of desegregation on the inclusion or exclusion of teachers of color influence our *current* policies for the promotion for diversity in the teaching workforce, especially serving urban schools?

Final Reflections on *Voices of Baltimore: Life under Segregation*

Forty-five minutes during the fall of 2014 ended up being more than simply hearing a visiting speaker in a classroom. It was an inspirational experience that left me with the goal to preserve the shared stories of individuals, and their struggles for equality and freedom. *Voices of Baltimore* began with an invitation to visit a section of EDUC 202: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives: America's Urban Education at Towson University to learn about the life experiences of Evelyn Chatmon, the first female African American Assistant Superintendent in Baltimore County Schools, of growing up and living through legal segregation, or Jim Crow. Ms. Chatmon shared her experiences, the values instilled by her parents, family, and community, the struggles, the personal integrity, and her continual dedication to make a difference in the lives of not only students, but adults as well. It was a deeply moving experience, a strikingly sense of the power of her story. It was transformational—a realization that this and other stories like it needed to be preserved—for the value, courage, commitment and dedication—not only for the individual but for the community in which they were raised. Perhaps more importantly, it was a recognition of those who came before, their struggles for dignity and rights as a human beings. It was also awareness of the possibility of the work as a teaching tool and the potential role it could play in healing American society.

The stories shared by the film participants are both unique, yet cross boundaries that can link us together and help us see who we are both individually and as a country, our positive qualities and our flaws, and where we need to go. These are stories of individuals that make a difference. As we move forward as a country, especially in our current political and cultural environment, it is critical to understand and address the historical and contemporary relevance of the persistence of inequality in our schools and society. The film and opportunity to work with, and learn from, the “voices” and my three colleagues has enabled me to more deeply look at issues of race, culture, power, inequality, and justice from different perspectives while creating something that is truly powerful and potentially transformative for others.

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