Epilogue

Tyra Beamon and Marwa Doost, AYPF Powered by the Children's Defense Fund

Introduction

Effective school integration prioritizes student leaders, ensuring that students are equipped with the resources needed to maintain a sense of belonging in school—a necessary component of successful integration efforts. Ariel H. Bierbaum, in "Stories of School Travel: Using a Mobility Justice Framework for Desegregation Research and Policy," outlines the importance of expanding the existing Eurocentric methodological toolbox for decision-making processes to include varying student voices for school integration efforts. Accordingly, this epilogue serves as a student-led response to address school integration, written by Tyra Beamon, a 26-year-old Black American woman, and Marwa Doost, a first-generation Afghan American, who both serve as youth policy consultants with the American Youth Policy Forum, powered by the Children's Defense Fund. Tyra brings to this epilogue her unique experiences, having attended nine schools before attending Tuskegee University, where she earned a BA in English. Tyra is an AmeriCorps alumna and former middle school teacher turned advocate committed to transforming communities through policy advocacy, health and wellness programming, and youth-led decision making. Tyra is currently pursuing an MA in educational transformation with a concentration in advocacy and policy at Georgetown University.

Marwa Doost has a diverse educational background, having attended traditional public schools and charter schools, as well as homeschooled herself throughout her K–12 education before graduating from the University of California, Berkeley, with a BA in honors English and a minor in global poverty and practice. Marwa is a community organizer and educational advocate who has dedicated herself to improving educational equity efforts at the local, federal, and international levels, and she now works at the Oakland Unified School District to ensure career readiness and equal opportunity for all students. Tyra and Marwa have drawn on their student and professional experiences to construct an epilogue focused on two points: (a) the impact of the student experience on students' sense of belonging; and (b) efforts to engage families, students, and key educators at the school level for effective integration. Therefore, ultimately, this

epilogue serves as a call to action for system-wide coalitions and government entities to emphasize youth voices and knowledge in decision-making processes.

Student Experience and Sense of Belonging

A well-rounded student experience should foster a student's sense of belonging and agency. Matthew Gonzales, in "Racially Just School Integration: A 21st Century, Student-Led Strategy," highlights the importance of inclusive classroom environments that encourage all students to challenge each other and build on one another's diverse knowledge. There is an assumption that diversity in school integration efforts automatically creates a better school climate; however, the reality is that there is an ongoing struggle to increase students' sense of belonging within the school climate, even in desegregated school settings. Gonzales elaborates on how "[s]tudents of color, Black girls in particular, face harsher and more persistent disciplinary policies, feel less connected to curricular choices that reinforce and glorify a Eurocentric view of education, and rarely if ever experience the exponential benefits of having teachers who reflect the racial and ethnic diversity of their neighborhood or country." Gonzales's essay highlights the reality for many students of color across the nation, including one of the authors of this epilogue, who has been unable to fully participate in academic opportunity due to limited staff diversity, ineffective learning circles, Eurocentric curricula, and lack of equal opportunities.

Marwa's Experience

The traditional public school system with its stagnant school climate undermines student success and belonging among students. As a product of Arizona's K–12 public school system, my student experience consisted of being one of the few Afghan Muslim students in the district, with teachers who struggled to effectively engage with other students of color and me. For example, my questions regarding limited curriculum resulted in teachers proposing "solutions" that placed the burden on me to develop a sense of belonging. Teachers had me partner with the one other student of color in hopes that we would help each other in the back of the classroom, away from the other students. These circumstances imposed an environment of exclusion within school integrative efforts. Additionally, the lack of diverse educators, combined with the limited and exclusionary curriculum, restricted us to a one-sided Eurocentric view of academic subjects that made it difficult to establish a sense of belonging at school. This impacted not only my own learning, but my classmates' global

perspective of the world. The education my classmates and I received failed to acknowledge important international and global contributions such as the impact of Arabic or Turkish root words on English spelling, Native American influences on American cuisine and culture as seen in history books, or the representation of diverse role models that went beyond stereotypical portrayals of our community in literary stories. These 'modern school integration practices … lack a firm commitment to cultural pluralism because of a focus on traditionally defined achievement,' as Stewart, Reichenberger, and Sorrell suggest in "School Integration Approaches Beyond the White Gaze: Centering Black, Latin*, Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA), and Indigenous Youth." These shortcomings create metrics meant to encourage assimilation rather than honoring culture and individual identity. They foster a climate of tension and exclusion for youth of color and others seen as 'different.' Ultimately, then, this experience highlights the detrimental impact on student academics when educators and curricula lack diversity, which consequently acts as a barrier to embracing a sense of belonging at school.

Tyra's Experience

I recall, from my own experiences as a Black girl growing up in inner city Los Angeles schools, having several teachers who looked like me and came from communities I grew up in. Most of my teachers were first-generation college graduates who saw value in returning to the very communities that had raised them and influenced their journeys. Such unique experiences helped me connect to my education in a way that allowed me to see myself in the curriculum and see myself as a valuable member of the school community. Teachers like Mrs. Hope and Ms. DeCree nurtured in me a sense of pride for being a gifted and smart Black girl and advocated that my voice be utilized in decision-making spaces such as the School-Site Council, where I was able to provide a student perspective on matters like student learning, education programs, school improvement planning, and accreditation issues. I was never asked to fragment any parts of my identity or to fit into any model. I was empowered to be me and to lead boldly. School was a safe place where our stories, our voices, and our gifts were protected and respected. It is critical that we acknowledge the value of students seeing themselves reflected in their teachers and curriculum. I believe that such integration efforts can benefit all students and move us toward educational equity. Research even demonstrates,

> Regular exposure to and interactions with individuals from a variety of races and ethnic groups, especially during childhood, combat stereotypes, strengthen students' abilities to become comfortable with peers from different backgrounds, reduce unconscious implicit biases inside and outside the classroom, and lead to innovative and greater social cohesion.[1]

Many students' experiences of belonging in school settings differ, yet all students deserve to have educational experiences that affirm their identities and cultural backgrounds. Schools should be spaces that build on the connections between the school and community, and ultimately breed success and motivational outcomes like improved performance and enhanced well-being.

Empowering Multilingual Learners and Fostering Agency in Educational Conversations

Students of color across the nation, specifically multilingual learners and newcomer students,[2] are struggling to acclimate to schools, which hinders their ability to embrace leadership positions in school integration efforts. Jennifer B. Ayscue and Victor Cadilla, in "Integration and Immersion: The Potential of Two-Way Dual Language Programs to Foster Integration," underscore how often these communities are left out of the conversation on school integration. Multilingual learners in particular lack access to grade-relevant social circles and curricula, which isolates them from their peers and classmates. Ayscue and Cadilla describe in greater detail how multilingual learners "not only attend similar schools but also are often isolated in English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes," a form of segregation within schools that separates students and is associated with lower academic outcomes and less opportunity and access to rigorous coursework. This linguistically based, exclusionary model, rooted in the stereotype that multilingual learners are deficient, also impacts resettling refugee and newcomer students, who are not represented in the ongoing discussion of how to promote a sense of belonging that fosters agency in school integration efforts.

Multilingual learners and newcomer students hold significant weight in conversations in school integration efforts regarding their reduced sense of belonging and agency. For example, beginning in August 2021, Operation Allies Welcome brought in more than 85,000 Afghan refugees across the United States, with roughly 44% of them children held on U.S. military bases, many of whom were integrated into the public school

system.[3] In an attempt to welcome these students onto school campuses, there has been a nationwide focus on increasing resources for newcomer centers within schools. These newcomer programs are implemented differently across schools and focus primarily on placing newly arrived students into classroom cohorts or groups where students of the same grade level or background are encouraged to stay together for meals, learning opportunities, and extracurricular electives. While such programs may help students acclimate to the American climate, it is important to underline that this approach categorizes the student's home language and background experiences "as an obstacle to overcome" as opposed to an asset that broadens the student and their classmates' perspectives on the global world, according to Ayscue and Cadilla. This deficit-oriented perspective of newcomer and multilingual learners contributes to a negative school climate because students of color begin to feel discouraged from becoming experts in their academics or leaders in local school councils and decision-making spaces. As a result, this mixed class of multilingual learners and newcomer students promotes a misleading perception of school integration and diversity in the overall school climate, when in reality, these students are struggling to fully integrate and develop a sense of belonging for themselves in the broader school community.

Educators have a responsibility to invite students to be co-creators within their classrooms and schools, where students are motivated to make decisions about their learning. An integrated school model in which multilingual learners and newcomers feel they belong should not prioritize pull-out programs, where students are removed from their regular classrooms to receive supplemental education. Instead, each student should be considered as an individual and given preferences regarding whether learning in a smaller setting builds success for them or not.

Tyra's Experience

In my first year as a co-teacher of English Language Arts to a diverse group of eighth graders, I witnessed students adopt deficit mentalities that they are 'different' or 'less than' when they are excluded or isolated as a result of a learning difference. Such practices are harmful and don't promote agency or belonging for our students. An integrated school model where multilanguage learners feel they belong looks like school staff going the extra mile to ensure everything they present to students and their families is translated into their native languages. I found myself staying up later and arriving to work a little earlier to make sure my students who were learning English as a

second language had supplemental materials that would allow them to follow along with their peers during collaborative learning.

To promote educational equity, we must ensure that each student's culture and identity is represented in staff, curricula, and pedagogy, which would acknowledge their needs to be seen and heard, and for every student to thrive in an integrated school environment.

Conclusion: Community Integration and Public Engagement Efforts

For integration efforts to prevail in an education system recovering from centuries of achievement gaps, unequal access, and racism, stakeholders and allies alike must be willing to take collective action. As stated in "Racially Just School Integration: A 21st Century, Student-Led Strategy," "We aren't only integrating schools; we are integrating communities." Integration in both spaces should center as many voices of the community as possible—students, families, and teachers, especially those impacted by segregationist policies and those likely to be left out of conversations. Youth with relevant lived experience are the most important to amplify in decision making regarding integration and equity, because it will be their generation's responsibility to carry out the advocacy to implement long-lasting systemic change. Students are our future leaders and should be engaged as experts and critical voices when planning for and moving toward transformation in our society. To meet the moment, funders, district leaders, and policymakers have a call to invest in the promotion and expansion of youth-led engagement in all efforts to eradicate segregation in America, and definitely in our schools.

Notes

1. Warner, S. R., & Duncan, E. (2019). *A vision and guidance for a diverse and learner-ready teacher workforce*. Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO). https://ccsso.org/sites/default/files/2019-01/Vision%20and%20Guidance%20for%20a%20Diverse%20and%20Learner-Ready%20Teacher%20Workforce_FINAL010919.pdf

2. California Department of Education. (2023). *Newcomer students*. https://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/el/er/newcomerstudnts.asp
    The California Department of Education defines newcomer students as "an umbrella term for foreign-born students who have recently arrived in the United States. Newcomer students may include, but are not limited to, asylees, refugees, unaccompanied youth, undocumented youth, migratory students, and other immigrant children and youth identified by the local educational agencies."

3. Napolitano, J. (2022). Young Afghan refugees in America adjust to new norms—Especially for girls. *The74*. https://www.the74million.org/article/young-afghan-refugees-in-america-adjust-to-new-norms-especially-for-girls/