

Reclaiming My Humanity: How I Became A School Integration Advocate

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This article shares an inspiring story of how an open heart can become a bridge between cultures and a powerful space for reimagining structures of oppression. In this beautifully written narrative exposition, Tanikawa speaks to what it means to be woke, working for integration, and Asian in a world of privilege, power, and paradox.

I am a newcomer to the school integration scene. Although I have been a public school parent and advocate for well over a decade and have cared about school diversity from the very beginning of my involvement, it was not until I learned to accept and own my racial identity a few years ago that I could begin to see myself as a school integration advocate. My journey for school integration has been both internal and external, requiring me to critically examine and dig deeply into my own history, experiences, values and beliefs, and at the same time build externally a movement with like-minded parents, educators, and students.

My two daughters are both public school kids from Pre-Kindergarten to high school. We live in Community School District 2 in Manhattan—one of the most affluent and whitest CSDs in New York City (NYC). I began my public school advocacy “career” with class size, school capacity, test-based accountability, and adequate funding as the major issues. I was interested in school diversity but my advocacy in it was not rooted in an understanding of systems of oppression. Rather it came from a place of liberal progressivism that is full of privilege, entitlement, and the “savior complex” that actually perpetuates white supremacy. Although I am an Asian immigrant, my family is affluent, and I have a post-graduate degree and a professional career. My socioeconomic status shielded me from overt racism and discrimination, and I assimilated with whiteness quite effectively—so effectively I did not know I was a person of color until recently.

LOOKING BACK

I have realized that my desire for school integration work is rooted somewhere deep inside me. This is hardly unique as I have observed that this work is deeply personal to my fellow integration activists. I wanted to know the emotional reason why I do the school integration work—as a volunteer in my spare time—because the intellectual answer to the question (e.g., it’s a moral imperative) does not feel authentic. So, in search of a truer answer, I have been doing a little digging into my past and looking inward to finding what it is that drives me.

I grew up in the 1960's Tokyo where everyone looked the same, spoke the same language, ate the same food, understood the same culture, and by and large had similar living standards. But in this homogeneous environment my family was different. My father was not a "salaryman" working for a corporation like my friends' fathers. My mother was a woman who spoke her mind unlike other mothers who smiled warmly and never yelled at other people's kids. As a result, I often felt I did not belong. Looking back, I wonder if this childhood experience might have planted the seeds of my yearning for diversity: When there are diverse people, nobody feels like the odd one out.

In a conformist country like Japan, being different was not easy. But in the U.S. being "individualistic" is valued. There were many reasons why my parents and I decided for me to attend high school in the U.S. but the lure (and the myth) of "you can be whatever you want and do whatever you want" was certainly a factor. My father and I selected a progressive private high school, one that is most different from Japanese pedagogy. (Little did I know it was very different from the mainstream American pedagogy as well.) I was beginning to embrace being different and unique.

I did not consciously think about this at the time but looking back, many of my friends at this predominantly white private school were students of color (and there were not that many!). It seemed that while I embraced the American brand of individualism and non-conformity I still yearned to belong. And, in a private school, I somehow figured out that I was part of the students of color group.

After three years at the small, very white private high school in a suburb of Boston, I applied to a college in NYC because I wanted to live in the

"Melting Pot." The high school was certainly more diverse than anything I had experienced in Japan, but it was still a private school in suburban Boston—not exactly a bastion of diversity. But as an 18-year-old foreign student, I lacked the sophistication needed to find a truly integrated college. I quite superficially chose the college I attended because it was in NYC. It turned out to be not so diverse (but it had lots of Asian students) and not quite integrated (students congregated by race and ethnicity—Korean women's club, Latina women's club, etc., and professors were all white). I did not understand why people wanted to hang out with other people who were like them. To me, the whole point of living in the Melting Pot was to meet different people. For this and other reasons, I transferred to an art school as a sophomore and spent the rest of my college life with quirky artists. Although not racially diverse, many of us felt we did not belong in the mainstream, and we cherished being different.

All through high school and college, while I was pursuing being an individual without the constraints of fitting in and conforming, I was also absorbing white supremacy with its internalized white superiority and the inferiority of people of color. Looking back now, I understand why I began shunning my heritage, stopped speaking Japanese, and tried my best to fit into the white norm. The irony of it all was completely lost on me: a young Asian woman working hard to conform to the white norm in search of her individuality.

So, I spent most of my adult life pretending to be a "white Asian"—otherwise known as a "twinkie" or a "banana." I even married a white American to unknowingly reinforce the stereotype of an Asian woman. I would be decades before I unearthed my Asian identity.

HOW I BECAME INVOLVED IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

In 1999 when my older daughter was ready for Pre-Kindergarten, I, like many white parents around me, began looking for elementary schools. I already knew we had a good elementary school in our zone (our downstairs neighbor had school age children), but it did not offer full-day PreK. Moreover, I found it not very diverse racially, so I looked around. For a variety of reasons, we decided our local school was the best choice, and I spent 14 years as a parent at that school (two children without overlapping years).

During those years, I noticed the number of students of color decline steadily as the school age population grew and the neighborhood became more expensive. While the school was lacking in racial diversity, it offered another type of diversity. The school had bridge classes in which students in two grades learned together as well as integrated co-teaching (ICT) classes in which students with disabilities learned with their general education peers. This diversity in learning abilities and styles in the classroom offered an important education for my children by broadening what it meant to be good students. They learned to find the strengths and talents in individual students and to respect the differences without attaching values or judgement. They had classmates who were good at math but struggled with reading. They had classmates who were not great with academics but were phenomenal artists. When my younger daughter was in her 4th grade ICT class, she came home one day to tell me about her classmate with disabilities and behavioral issues. (He often ran out of the classroom in an emotional distress.) On that day, she discovered that this student excelled in math. At the tender young age of 9, children already harbored biases against students with disabilities. But for my daughter, spending time with students

with disabilities on a daily basis began to chip away at the biases. She learned not to judge or define people by their disabilities or abilities.

As valuable as these lessons were for me and my children, the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity was still troubling. The school lacked teachers of color as well. But because of my and the school's affluence, I harbored no sense of urgency for school integration: My children were receiving a "good" education after all. It was important but not enough to set aside other issues I cared about, such as class size and test score-based accountability. This was before I learned how an education in a racially isolated environment is, in fact, detrimental to my children's ability to realize their full humanity.

FROM AN INVOLVED PARENT TO AN ADVOCATE

When my older daughter was in 3rd grade, I became involved with the elementary school PTA. As part of the PTA, I began attending District 2 PTA Presidents' Council—a gathering of PTA leaders from District 2 elementary and middle schools. There I learned that issues affecting my daughter's school, such as high stakes testing, large class sizes, etc. were systemic problems that affected all schools. That was my foray into public education advocacy, but I was still just a public school advocate—a long way from becoming a school integration activist.

From the District 2 Presidents' Council, I moved up to the Community Education Council District 2 (CECD2) in 2009. I have served on the CECD2 since and at various times held the position of President or Vice President. I currently chair the Diversity Committee.

Early on in my CECD2 tenure, I met a veteran member from our neighboring district, CSD1. She has been advocating for an equity-based admissions process

for elementary schools in CSD1, whose schools do not have attendance zones and offer seats through a lottery. From her, I learned about a process called controlled choice and how a free market choice admissions process, without mechanisms for equitable enrollment, creates segregated schools.

Removing attendance zones from elementary schools in District 2 is likely a non-starter partially because of the geography of the district. However, District 2 already offers middle school choice which presents a real opportunity. I started contemplating the possibilities, but on the CECD2, conversations were limited. Shortly after I came on, we had several new elementary schools come online which required the CECD2 to create attendance zones. Like any other school zoning, the meetings were contentious and often got ugly. We had multiple years of school rezonings, which took much of our energy leaving very little space for taking up other issues.

Partly due to inadequate school capacity planning, we began seeing middle school overcrowding (you build new elementary schools, the kids inevitably grow up to go to middle school). The increase in students appears to have come mostly from affluent white families (based on the neighborhoods that opened new elementary schools and the residential development that prompted new school capacities). With the increased demand and scarcity of middle school seats perceived to be desirable, we began hearing complaints from families on the stressful process of middle school choice.

In 2013, a dozen or so parents came to a CECD2 meeting to complain that their children did not receive offers to any of the schools they listed on their applications. We established the CECD2 Middle School Committee to begin examining the issues more deeply. The Middle School Committee met on a

regular basis and analyzed the issues: that the process (1) lacked transparency, (2) was highly stressful for families and children, and (3) was inequitable. The last issue was framed as equity of access: Some students did not stand a chance of getting into some of the highly coveted D2 middle schools because of screening.

My own thinking has evolved through this process. When we began the Middle School Committee, I was not opposed to screening. There were a few reasons for my position on screening. My older daughter went to a very diverse (racially and socioeconomically and by test scores) middle school that used screens to admit students. My younger daughter went to another very diverse middle school that used screens. These schools were not the “most popular” schools and were intentional about maintaining their diversity. I understood that the interplay between screening and the demand (e.g., the number of applicants per seat) mattered in whether a school becomes segregated. I also understood that screening could be used to create diverse schools. I also knew, from following the trends in CSD1 that a lottery system of admission (what the NYC DOE calls “unscreened”) does not automatically create diverse schools. Lottery only makes enrollment reflect the applicant pool: If the applicant pool is predominantly white, then the admitted students will be predominantly white.

The more personal reason for not opposing screening was that I wanted something that could potentially teach my very privileged mixed-race children a little humility. My older daughter was rejected by her first-choice school. As hard as it was for her (and me, to see her upset), I thought a small rejection would be healthy. Looking back, I am embarrassed by this line of logic that only a privileged person can embrace.

As I began analyzing data for the Middle School Committee—demographics,

socioeconomic status, test scores, students with disabilities and English Language Learners (or Multilingual Learners), admissions methods, applicants to seats, and so forth—I began to realize how segregated our middle schools are in District 2 even though we have diverse students (one of a handful of districts in which we have relatively balanced representation of races). After many months of discussions and data analyses, the focus of the whole committee shifted to diversity in our middle schools. In July 2016, the CECD2 officially changed from the Middle School Committee to the Diversity Committee.

DISCOVERING MY RACIAL IDENTITY TO BECOME A SCHOOL INTEGRATION ADVOCATE

I was still not a school integration advocate at this point. I thought diversity was what we needed; however, I was still full of internalized white (and Model Minority) superiority and internalized inferiority of people of color (including Asians). My understanding of racism was limited to the interpersonal and the “southern” kind, even though I have had my fair share of racial microaggressions.

I acted like a typical white Manhattan liberal (except I wasn’t white) with all of the pitfalls—the deficit narrative, the denial, the fragility, the savior complex. I understood intellectually that there was systemic oppression of Black and Latinx people, but I did not understand how the system was upheld by well-meaning white (and many affluent Asian) people, or how the system did not require overtly racist people to function. At the same time, I was always very aware of my ethnic heritage as a Japanese citizen. I was an “accidental” immigrant: I did not come to the U.S. to escape an oppressive regime or in search of better opportunities. I came because my father had the means to send me

to a private school in the U.S., and I ended up staying because I fell in love and married an American citizen. But I was able to maintain a close connection to the country of my birth and carried a healthy dose of national pride, even while shunning my background because being Asian was nerdy and uncool. It is remarkable how one can harbor both pride and shame in her heritage at the same time. I identified as Japanese—an ethnicity, but not as an Asian—a race. My personal history, affluence, and East Asian origin shielded me from much of the worst kind of oppression and kept me in the fog of whiteness, even though once in a while the fog would clear, and I could see and feel racist acts against me.

There was no pivotal moment that led me to my current path. Rather there were many “clues” that were pointing to it. In 2015, I served as the treasurer of my younger daughter’s middle school. The principal requested PTA funds for an anti-racism workshop for the entire faculty. In a conversation after the workshop, the principal said people of color cannot be racist because racism is about racial prejudice with power. That little comment made me realize how little I knew about racism. Months later, I took a social justice workshop through work. Although it was not explicitly about racism, the two-and-a-half-day workshop was firmly rooted in anti-racism and the work of Paulo Freire. I was hooked.

In early 2017, I organized an all-day anti-racism workshop for District 2 parents as part of the Diversity Committee’s work. From that point on, I attended many anti-racism workshops and devoured articles, books, and blogs, and I continue to obsessively read books on race and racism. As I began developing a deeper understanding of racism in the U.S., I was able to see the problems with the public school system more clearly. I realized putting diverse students in the same classroom was

not enough. Teachers needed to alter their curriculum and pedagogy. We also needed more teachers who look like the students they teach. How we discipline students also needed to be reformed. Resources do not just mean money; human resources, social capital and opportunities for students all make a difference in a child's education. The whole system needed to change, not just a school here and a school there. I began using the term school integration instead of diversity and, in my own way, defined it as diverse students, diverse teachers, and culturally relevant pedagogy.

At the same time, I was making the journey of awakening. I began building a network of education advocates and anti-racism activists citywide. Stepping outside of the District 2 bubble was one of the best educational experiences for me. I have met fellow public school advocates from the South Bronx, Brownsville, Bed-Stuy, Sunset Park, and other low income communities of color in NYC. I have also met parent advocates for children with disabilities. Needless to say, their stories and experiences are quite different from mine, and their perspectives have been invaluable in my work. For instance, I learned that "school integration" can mean busing Black students into white schools—a traumatic history from the 1960s. I have met parents who do not support school integration because they believe school integration is based on the notion that Black and Latinx children need white children to succeed. There are parents of color who support standardized testing because it offers them a mechanism to hold schools accountable. I learned the conventional public meeting format is not always the right way to engage disenfranchised parents. By working with these parents, I was experiencing firsthand the enormous benefit of a diverse learning environment. They have broadened my horizon, deepened my understanding, and made me a more effective advocate.

I also became a part of a larger community of parents who deeply cared about the public school system for all children. Even with our disagreements and differing perspectives, we are each other's support system, and having them in my world has sustained me.

As I deepened my understanding of structural racism in the U.S., it took a while longer for me to begin to grasp how Asians fit into the racial hierarchy. As eye opening as the workshops, books, and articles have been, analyses of Asians, particularly in public education, were not as readily available. Even in the racial justice arena we seem to be frequently forgotten. I know why this is: We don't fit into the binary narrative of racism, and our stories make institutional and structural racism more complicated. I understand white privilege and fragility because of my proximity to whiteness. I have also experienced microaggression and harbor a low level of fear that the system will label me undesirable. I am aware my privilege is given to me by the white power structure. But I have not been subject to the more traumatic and damaging racism of the type my fellow people of color must endure on a daily basis.

So my anti-racism and school integration work has led me to dig deeper into understanding Asian Americans. I learned that we are an oppressed people who have lived through lynchings, government sanctioned school segregation, red-lining, and exclusion (both from attaining citizenship and exercising rights as citizens). My people were also civil rights activists fighting alongside our Black and Latinx sisters and brothers from the very beginning. I learned how the Model Minority myth was created for political expediency by the U.S. government. At the same time, the Model Minority myth has served many of us in attaining the positions we have. We are both victims and perpetrators in this system, but I



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now understand how the system uses Asians as a wedge between the white power structure and Black and Latinx people fighting for their humanity. And when the wedge is not needed, we are ignored or treated as “the other” who does not belong.

WHAT I HAVE LEARNED

School integration work requires an understanding of racism in this country, especially if you are white or East Asian. This is often painful work that requires one to dig deeply into oneself and come face-to-face with all the implicit biases and internalized racism baked into one body. It certainly challenged me because acknowledging my own internalized racism threatened my identity as a good, conscientious person. I began to see this as clearing my vision to see the world for what it really is so that I could be authentic in the work I do. It is also work that is constant (every day when you are interacting with people) and permanent (because the world will not change in my lifetime), and frankly exhausting at times.

As much as this work is internal, it also requires one to go external, to form friendships and partnerships with people outside of our comfortable bubbles. To understand the system, one needs to see it through perspectives different from our own. If we do not understand the

complexities and nuances of this system, we cannot begin to think of solutions. People who work with us are also important for our self-care. My fellow activists in this work are the ones who keep me going and nourish my heart and mind.

Needless to say, it has not been an easy journey. Recently, I had fellow Asian parents call me racist because I support reforming NYC Specialized High Schools admission policies. I have had white parents accuse me of not representing District 2 families because I want to make the system more equitable for Black and Latinx families. It is tempting to write them off as entitled, privileged, unwoke, racist, or clueless, but I am trying to see it through the lens of how white supremacy robs white people of their humanity, too.

I truly believe school integration is a way to begin dismantling the white supremacist system at work in education in order to move toward an anti-racist education system. Closing the opportunity gap, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, and giving a high quality education to all students are important goals, but if we can raise the next generation of students with fewer implicit biases aimed at them and less internalized racism and with a better understanding of race and racism in our society, then maybe we can dream of an entirely different system that is not rooted in white supremacy. To me this work is a matter of survival for the entire human species.

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