

## **Why uniformity is a step backward**

**Stirred by our feature on resegregation, an alumnus of the high school at the heart of the story reflects on what has been lost**

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Special to the Star

My mom just sent me a copy of an article in last Sunday's *Toronto Star* about the education system in the town where I grew up, Charlotte, N.C., and more specifically about the high school I attended. You can read the article here: [thestar.com/article/302079](http://thestar.com/article/302079). It's excellent.

Anyway, the point is that I was one of the kids who grew up during a time in which Charlotte was focused on actively integrating the school system. I had to wake up early and ride the bus for an hour as I was bused from my middle-class, white suburban home to the lower-class, black neighbourhood that housed my school.

I went to progressive elementary and middle schools that didn't believe in academically gifted and remedial classes. Instead, they put the AG kids next to the remedial kids in desk clusters without telling them that one was "smart" and one was "dumb."

The idea was that the kids who excelled would help the kids having trouble. They were very integrated schools, with about 50 per cent white kids, 40 per cent black kids, and 10 per cent international immigrants/refugees (mostly Asian/Vietnamese at that time). And you know what? It was awesome.

Going to a completely integrated school is what made me the person I am today. I grew up with lots of friends of all different races and never thought anything about it.

In short, my experience is what everyone hoped could be achieved when they got out and marched and sat in at Woolworth's during the Civil Rights movement. It was the whole point of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

But by the late 1990s, Charlotte had become a banking hub for the U.S. That meant that lots of people moved in from other, more segregated parts of America.

Some didn't like that their kids had to be bused across town. They wanted the school system to function the way it did in their hometowns. So a judge reversed the order to integrate the schools, and Charlotte's school system went back to being neighbourhood-based.

Now the wonderful, integrated schools that I went to are poor neighbourhood schools full of poverty-stricken black students. Their test scores have plummeted. Perhaps it's proof that the dream our parents had about the effect integration could have on black test scores has failed.

But to me that's not the point. The point is that now students in Charlotte are going to school with kids that look just like them, who have the same amount of (or lack of) money, and come from the same housing situation. In short, they're no longer learning about tolerance and racial integration.

When I moved to New Jersey, I remember feeling like there just weren't any black people. It's not that there weren't, but in much of New Jersey you live in a black, white, Asian or Hispanic neighbourhood, and those are the schools you go to.

When I went back to Rutgers in Newark to study Spanish, again, suddenly I felt comfortable and like I was home. It's because I was unconsciously used to seeing black people everywhere, everyday, and on campus I did.

My husband gets tired of hearing me talk about it. We don't have kids yet, but eventually we will and it is so important to me that they know about other people, I'm not sure I could raise them in New Jersey. It would take a supreme effort on my part, driving them from town to town, to involve them in extracurricular activities that expose them to people of different races. It makes me sad that today Charlotte and New Jersey are so similar.

I feel extremely blessed to have been raised in a time when the adults felt strongly about civil rights and actually walked the walk. You can't tell your kid that everyone is made the same and that skin colour is just skin colour and expect them to grow up not have some reservations about people who are different from them if you don't give them the opportunities to experience true integration.

How can people expect their kids not to believe in stereotypes if they don't have experiences that prove that stereotypes are just that?

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