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THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of Jan. 14-18, 2013

Sylvia Rousseau on Martin Luther King Jr.'s Legacy

by UCLA IDEA

For our *Themes in the News* this week, John Rogers sat down with legendary Los Angeles educator, Sylvia Rousseau, to talk Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s legacy for educational justice. Dr. Rousseau has been a principal at Santa Monica High School, the superintendent of the LAUSD local district serving South Los Angeles, and most recently the acting principal at Crenshaw High School in 2011-12. She has been a professor of clinical education at USC since 2006.

This year will mark the 50th anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I Have a Dream" speech. Should students still be reading this speech a half-century later?

I love that speech, but I don't think it's the most substantive representation of who Dr. King is. It certainly was an inspirational speech; it hit all the right notes. But many have used it to reduce him to a dreamer. A larger body of his work, both nationally and internationally, tends to get ignored, such as his calling the nation to task over Viet Nam and the disproportionate number of soldiers of color who were dying on the front lines. The aspect of Dr. King that we shouldn't forget is his ability to see through the surface of crucial matters and identify the underlying inequities, the underlying racism and classism. Our regard for Dr. King isn't just about a dreamer who stood on stage and gave a great speech. He put himself at great risk for the principles he articulated.

We also forget the spiritual part of Dr. King. He had a deep love for humanity and for this nation. One of my favorite works of his is a series of sermons called "The Strength in Love." They are about pressing on behalf of the oppressed and the human capacity to be compassionate. It is about loving our enemies. He always spoke of the beloved community. You can't do the things he did without a love for our neighbors. He saw his work as redeeming the soul of a nation that struggled with loving its neighbors.

When you were a principal, you had a beautiful, large portrait of him above your desk. How do feel Dr. King's legacy informed your work as a school leader?

Paulo Freire helped me to understand more fully King's concept of loving my neighbor in the context of schooling. The concept of education as liberation became a driving force in my work as I realized my role was to create conditions under which the entire community could come together to create a school that functioned equitably on behalf of all its students, including those who had been excluded or underserved. Actions included creating a humanities class for incoming ninth graders that included a study of nonviolence and a study of the various cultures represented on the campus. The intent of the class was to liberate students from the notion that acts of violence actually worked in their best interest and to inspire a respect for the many differences in cultures represented on the campus. It was an attempt to engage students in building a beloved community. The class is one example of actions taken to create a school culture of mutual respect for one another's humanity.

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The notion of the beloved community helped me to work toward collaborative and cooperative relationships with teachers and parents, recognizing that school reform comes from people, not edicts. Achieving the beloved community calls for parents and teachers working together in nontraditional ways that break through oppressive hierarchies. It is impossible to love people's children and exclude their parents.

When the work of building a beloved community for liberating education became difficult, reminding myself of the extent of Dr. King's labors on behalf of the beloved community inspired me to stay in the struggle. I came to understand this kind of love in terms articulated by Freire: "It is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well thought out capacity to love." The most caring thing a principal can do is create the conditions for the entire community to have a stake in creating an excellent school. Love for the community means investing in people with the trust that they want to be part of what is good and just and moral.

There has been a lot of discussion of late about high suspension rates, particularly for students of color. Some are calling for alternatives to zero tolerance approaches to school discipline. Given that, what lessons for school leaders do you draw today from Dr. King's philosophy of non-violence?

Discrimination and oppression have hurt a lot of children for a very long time, and they bear the marks from generations past. Some students come to school with their hurts, which cause them to act in ways that are harmful to themselves and others. School doesn't mean a whole lot to them. When they manifest these issues in their behavior, you can't let them tear up the schools, and you don't want to suspend them. So we need to have resources that are preventive, recognizing the issues our students face. The classroom has to be a place of respect, shaped by a curriculum and pedagogy that respects their lives. It's about creating better schools where students have opportunities to be problem-solvers and creators. They require support in managing their challenges while they adopt identities as high achieving students. That is the role of a liberating education. Anything less reduces students to widgets or what Freire would call mere objects.

In June 1963, Dr. King came to Los Angeles and joined a march with a coalition of Los Angeles organizations, including the NAACP, the ACLU, CORE, labor unions, and several black churches, under the banner of the United Civil Rights Committee to push for school integration and educational equity. If educational equity and integration were the primary educational justice issues of the 1960s, what are the central issues today?

The picture may have changed somewhat, but the essential challenge is the same: to fulfill every child's right to equitable opportunities to learn.

In a relatively short time, the nation has returned to looking much as it did in the pre-Brown era of

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school segregation. We're seeing in our nation now what happens to people when they are isolated from people who don't look like them or people who may have differences. Our children are growing up without opportunities to experience and appreciate differences. The results are dangerous. In returning to segregated schools, the nation is squandering the opportunity for students to find their own places in the midst of a diverse world.

Your comments bring to mind Dr. King's acceptance speech for the Nobel Peace Prize, when he said, "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." What challenges do schools face today in trying to ensure that Dr. King's promise is realized for all students?

I think we have a pedagogy of poverty in too many of our schools. We are so minimalist now. I'm not totally opposed to some form of standardized testing, but the emphasis we've given to it has led us to sacrifice teaching about social responsibility and the broader principles of what it means to be human. There is urgency for kids to pass tests, but I'm not sure how much we are facilitating the growth of their humanity or assisting them to be responsible citizens in a very complex world.

And so that's one of my issues. The other is, there's this market-driven neglect. I don't even call it benign neglect; it's abject neglect. Crenshaw High School is an example of that. You have a school that's had a parade of eight principals averaging two years, and more than 30 assistant principals within less than 10 years. You can't create a thriving learning environment under these conditions. We see this happening in inner-city schools at a rate you don't see happening in others. With budget cuts, districts have to make decisions that disproportionately affect the poor or students of color who, are predominantly the poor.

So do you feel hopeful today? Do you feel like you can be audacious in the same way Dr. King called for?

I think that there's not an option but to be audacious. And I don't know that the struggle is any more daunting now than it was then. That is the problem—we've made movement, but it's superficial and unsustained. We don't have to call out the troops at Central High School today. The forms that segregation and oppression take are more subtle. Identifying the issues is harder now.

So what leaves you hopeful?

I think my greatest hope resides in the inspiration I get from the people I know who just refuse to go away and give up the fight.

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