



## **Lesson 1: The Problem We Still Live With?**

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## **Discussing *The Problem We All Live With***

*The Problem We All Live With* by Norman Rockwell appeared in *Look* magazine in 1964, ten years after the Brown decision and during the height of the Civil Rights Movement. The artist was inspired by Ruby Bridges, the sole African American child to attend a New Orleans elementary school after court-ordered desegregation in 1960. Although Bridge's story was the inspiration, the painting is not meant to be specifically about her. It is a broader social commentary on the situation into which thousands of African American students were thrust during the early years of school desegregation.

### **Discussing Artistic Elements With Students**

#### **Contrast**

When we view the painting, our eyes are immediately drawn to the young girl because her dress, socks and sneakers are a bright white, which provides a strong contrast to the dark brown of her skin. The colors of the marshals' skin and clothing, however, provide little contrast and blend more with the background.

#### **Line**

We are also drawn to the girl by the ridge running horizontally across the wall and by the sidewalk cracks, which together frame the girl. If the sidewalk cracks were further extended, they would actually point right to the girl.

#### **Rhythm**

The repetition of shapes in the painting provides a certain rhythm that pulls various elements together. Notice the position of the arms and legs, the recurring loose fists, and the walking motion.

#### **Color**

One of the first things we notice in this painting is the bright red of the tomato splattered against the wall. Notice how the splatter runs down the wall and across the ground, creating a trail back to the girl, who is the central focus of the painting. Bright color is also used for the marshals' armbands. The bright yellow contrasts with the muted color of their clothing and skin tones, capturing our attention and suggesting danger.

#### **Other Elements**

The image is composed to evoke an affective response. The disturbing graffiti, the violent splatter of a hurled object, the lone girl, and the police presence combine to create a strong emotional content. The marshals' faces are not included in the painting and only the girl's body is fully visible, which increases our sense of emotional connection with the girl. While we may identify with the girl, however, a certain physical separation is present. The artist has placed the viewer across the street from the procession, where she/he must rely on instinct and imagination to understand what may be going on inside the hearts and minds of the paintings' subjects.

## Definitions

The words *segregation*, *desegregation*, and *integration* will be used frequently throughout this unit, so it is important for students to work from shared definitions of these terms. The term *segregation* should not be used to refer solely to the experiences of “minority” communities, as majority or dominant groups also bear the consequences of racial separation in U.S. society. As noted below, it is also important not to use the words *desegregation* and *integration* interchangeably, as the spirit of each term is markedly different. The definitions below have been adapted from the following sources to specifically address a school or education context.

- *Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary*
- *An “Integrated” Theory of Integrated Education* by John A. Powell, The Civil Rights Project, Harvard University

**Segregation:** The separation or isolation of a race, class or ethnic group by enforced or voluntary attendance in separate educational facilities; refers to situations in which a disproportionate number of white students or students of color attend a school or school system.

**Desegregation:** Efforts to eliminate *segregation* by removing laws or practices that require or encourage separation. *Desegregation* aims to reduce racial imbalances, usually by moving and mixing racial populations to end racial isolation. As it has played out in most U.S. educational settings, *desegregation* requires students of the non-dominant group (most often non-white) to assimilate into the school and culture of the dominant group (most often white) without changes in school structures to meet the needs of the new students.

**Integration:** The incorporation of individuals from different racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups as equals into a school. *Integration* moves beyond removing legal barriers and simply placing students of different backgrounds together. It addresses the racial hierarchies and prejudices that exist in school communities by reforming structures to be more inclusive and transforming the culture of the school.

### From Martin Luther King, Jr., “Ethical Demands for Integration”

The word segregation represents a system that is prohibitive; it denies the Negro equal access to schools, parks, restaurants, libraries and the like. Desegregation is eliminative and negative, for it simply removes these legal and social prohibitions. Integration is creative, and is therefore more profound and far-reaching than desegregation. Integration is the positive acceptance of desegregation and the welcomed participation of Negroes in the total range of human activities. Integration is genuine intergroup, interpersonal doing. Desegregation then rightly is only a short-range goal. Integration is the ultimate goal of our national community. Thus as America pursues the important task of respecting the letter of the law, i.e., compliance with desegregation decisions, she must be equally concerned with the spirit of the law, i.e., commitment to the democratic dream of integration