

# The Fierce Urgency of Now: A Reflection on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Call to Action and Educational Equity

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*The fierce urgency of now* has, understandably, made its way into our education reform vocabulary. It has come to mean that the heinous educational conditions that cause children to lose their educational lives and social and economic futures exist because we fail to consistently teach many of them to read and think adequately for these times. We interpret the phrase, *the fierce urgency of now*, as urging that schools, teachers, researchers, policymakers, and others need to stop dithering and wasting time, and get down to the business of eradicating unacceptable educational problems with all deliberate speed. In short, we interpret it to mean, “Get to it now!” and “Produce results!” and “We have no more time to waste!” By far, the most famous person to utter the phrase *the fierce urgency of now* was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The day honoring Dr. King’s birth is a fitting moment to consider how we might understand *the fierce urgency of now* and how we might take our insights forward to confront the problems we educators face today.

Dr. King used the phrase *the fierce urgency of now* on at least two memorable occasions. The first was the **“I Have a Dream”** speech delivered on August 28, 1963, at the Lincoln Memorial on the Washington, D.C. National Mall. The second was his **“Beyond Vietnam”** sermon of April 1967, given at Riverside Church in New York City. In each of these, he surely signaled a sense of impatience in the face of looming catastrophe. In the “I Have a Dream” speech, when referring to how black people were being short-changed on the promissory note of civil rights, Dr. King said, “This is no time ... to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.” In a similar vein in the “Beyond Vietnam” sermon, Dr. King warned us that the failure to heed *the fierce urgency of now* may render our aspirations for peace to join “... the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations [where it is] written the pathetic words, ‘Too late.’”

In his urging society at that time to fiercely concentrate and focus on the palpable challenges to humanity, Dr. King also signaled the importance of another essential form of vigilance — attention to systems and contexts. In the case of the “Beyond Vietnam” speech, he not only implored that the United States stop military action with all deliberate speed, but compelled Americans to understand that the Vietnamese people’s demand for self-determination was not an isolated demand, but part of a world chorus “to transform the jangling discords of our world into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.” In his poetic way, Dr. King reminded Americans that Vietnam’s aspirations were part of a global struggle of the developing world and of disadvantaged peoples everywhere.

Similarly, in the “I Have a Dream” speech, he reminded the assemblage that the destinies of blacks and whites in the United States are “inextricably bound.” Urgency, for Dr. King, was for people to understand justice as a system with its elements linked together. Without a just world for blacks there could not be one for whites. Similarly,

there could not be true self-determination for us in the United States unless all humankind, those in the developed and in the developing world, achieved it. On both occasions Dr. King put into resolution the duality of proper attention to *the fierce urgency of now* — fast deliberate action must be coupled to thoughtful analysis and appreciation of systemic context.

What are we, in this era, to take from the duality of *the fierce urgency of now*? Today, we are caught in the throes of highly variable educational interventions and reforms that work well for some yet are disastrous for others. I suggest we have to look across the landscape of our reform approaches, be they technological, curricular, governance, or any of a host of other ideas, and be accountable for their performance as a community. We have to accept that many of our reforms are object examples of inequality in that they don't work nearly as well, for all, as our aspirations would dictate. Absent this acceptance of responsibility for all, we are guilty mistaking activity for action. Dr. King's call was for action, not mere activity. This is the essential duality of the call to accept *the fierce urgency of now*; that we must act with all due alacrity, yet also with the thoughtfulness and seriousness of purpose appropriate to meaningful action.

It is often the case that the best planned interventions fall short when it comes to the most disadvantaged. For example, as Jane Margolis, (and others before her), starkly points out in her book **"Stuck in the Shallow End,"** ever since powerful computers arrived at schools, advantaged schools have been using them to channel children into creative and exciting activities, while children in less advantaged schools, are channeled into routine and mind-numbing repetitive activities. In other cases, we see that when promising programs like Reading Recovery go to scale, profound variability is the result of exceptional promise. In many schools, Reading Recovery programs significantly helped readers to improve, whereas in other schools, children experienced no noticeable benefits.

Dr. King's duality of urgency should compel us to two understandings. First, we ought to take on the identity of what the Gates Foundation calls "impatient optimists." We ought to demand new innovations that improve life chances and believe that such innovations have the power to improve the life chances for all children, advantaged and disadvantaged, at life's starting line and across the course of their lives. To feed our optimism, we ought to be demanding that these innovations come online as quickly as possible and that they provide available evidence of promise. We should be holding ourselves uncompromisingly accountable for making progress *now*.

Second, at the same time that we are impatient optimists, we should not be complacent optimists. We should avoid congratulating ourselves for doing no more than securing a promissory note. At all costs, we have to avoid the smug self-satisfaction that doing good works is good enough; that if we just stay the course with an innovation, eventually a miracle will happen and all people, especially the most disadvantaged, will be well served. Variability in performance happens. What works well for some will not, without disciplined effort, produce sustainable improvement in the life chances of many others. When reforms like computing interventions fail, as Margolis brought to our

attention, to improve the educational lives for the disadvantaged, we have to pursue a relentless commitment to understanding why and to learning how to improve outcomes based on this understanding.

Here at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching we have embraced continuous improvement. This approach has helped us to attend to the duality of *the fierce urgency of now* in view. Continuous improvement has helped us to learn how to be disciplined and rigorous optimists. When we find that a promising intervention like our Math Pathways program can triple the performance of traditional approaches to help 50 percent of math-disadvantaged learners to attain a college mathematics credit in a single academic year (whereas business-as-usual accomplishes about a 15 percent success rate), it spurs us to ask, “how can we improve it to help the other 50 percent who did not attain the college mathematics credit?” We are not simply congratulating ourselves on the promise. We refuse to allow ourselves to be complacent optimists. In behaving this way, we are, hopefully, living out both parts of the duality as a vital complementarity.

Dr. King’s duality reminds us that we have to live on both sides of a line. We must demand results now. But we must also demand that our innovations be robust in that they excel in all contexts and for all learners. As an educational community, we *should* feel a shared urgency with the desperation of a parent of a fourth grader who does not read. If we live Dr. King’s *fierce urgency of now*, we will take little solace in knowing that our whiz-bang intervention worked well for some. We will rejoice only when our whiz-bang interventions work for all.

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