Part Three

1950-1980

SEPARATE AND UNEQUAL

Introduction

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In a wonderful book about history and memory, Richard White reminds us that any good history begins in strangeness. "The past should be so strange that you wonder how you and people you know and love could come from such a time."[1] As we advance in the modern crusade for equal educational opportunity, we realize that its form and content in 1950 varied considerably from that of the present. America in 1950 was a fundamentally different nation, one that is increasingly difficult to comprehend and appreciate from our contemporary angle of vision. In 1950, though it was often dangerous—and in seventeen states illegal—for ethnic minorities to attend so-called white public schools, the promise of American public education held a special place in the hearts and minds of citizens across the nation. From the viewpoints of various minority communities, public schooling affected their children's chances for active participation in American life and served as the main community issue

1. Richard White, *Remembering Ahanagran: Storytelling in a Family's Past* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1998), 13.

around which different people could rally to promote achievement, equality, and the promise of the American dream. As the experience of the past five decades has brought with it consequences not imagined in 1950, goals and struggles that once seemed noble are now faded dreams and points of contention. Discussions of school integration, for example, have been removed from the national agenda and find expression only in lawsuits and isolated corners of academies. Since the formative stages of the civil rights movement, the role of public education in a democracy has been constantly redefined. Hence, a dialogue between the past and the present on the critical issues raised by *Brown v. Board of Education* and the resulting campaigns for equal educational opportunity seems much needed at this moment in the nation's history.

To be sure, the opportunity to achieve a good education and the right to attend school without discrimination are still valued in most American communities. Though the issue of equal educational opportunity remains serious business, virtually no one today thinks of it as an issue that one might have to die for. This was not so five decades ago. In 1950, people had to risk their lives and futures for equal educational opportunities. When Joseph Albert Delaine filed a lawsuit against local white school officials for not providing school buses for his three children, he understood that the consequences could be fatal. Local white authorities in Clarendon County, South Carolina, home of one of the five consolidated cases that we now know as *Brown v. Board of Education*, fired him from the little schoolhouse where he had taught for ten years. They also fired his wife, two of his sisters, and a niece. Then they burned his house to the ground. They stoned the church at which he pastored and fired shotguns at him out of the dark. Ultimately they burned down his church and ran him from the state.[2]

Melba Pattillo Beals, one of the nine African American teenagers chosen in 1957 to integrate Little Rock's Central High School, began her memoir with a statement of gratitude that makes sense only in the context of the violent confrontations that characterized the mid-century struggles for educational equality. "I will always be grateful to the men of the 101st Airborne, who did

2. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Knopf, 1976), 3.

their personal best to protect us from attacks."[3] In 1957, while white teenage girls were listening to Buddy Holly's "Peggy Sue," Melba Pattillo Beals was escaping the hanging rope of a lynch mob, dodging lighted sticks of dynamite, and washing away burning acid sprayed into her eyes. To uphold the law and protect the lives of students, President Dwight David Eisenhower sent the 101st Airborne Division, the elite "Screaming Eagles," to Little Rock to keep the doors of Central High open and allow the nine teenagers to complete a full day of classes. At the center of the controversy were nine African American young people who wanted a better education. Although most attempts to attain a better education were not attended by such extreme violence, the campaigns of terrorism that included telephone threats, insults and assaults at school, brigades of attacking white citizens, rogue police, and economic blackmail were characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s.

For example, on September 3, 1965, seven of Mae Bertha and Matthew Carter's children lined up to wait for the school bus that would take them to desegregate the all-white public schools in Sunflower County, Mississippi. Soon after their successful attempts to desegregate the all-white Drew High School, the Carters' home was riddled with bullets in the middle of the night. The owner of the plantation on which they lived canceled their credit at his store and threw them off his land. At school the Carter children were tormented by white students and by some of the teachers. The Carters understood that their children would endure physical and psychological punishment in the hostile racial climate of their new school. Still, they felt that changing schools was their best chance to get their children out of the cotton fields. Eight Carter children graduated from Drew High School, and seven went on to college at the University of Mississippi.[4]

Melba Pattillo Beals closes her memoir with a statement that compels us to revisit the 1950s with a sense of strangeness and unfamiliarity. "As I watch videotapes now and think back to that first day at Central High on September 4, 1957, I wonder what possessed my parents and the adults of the NAACP to

3. Melba Pattillo Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock's Central High* (New York: Pocket Books, 1994), 4.
4. Constance Curry, *Silver Rights* (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books, 1995).

allow us to go to that school in the face of such violence."[5] Beals raises questions that should remain a part of our ongoing debate about the meaning of public education in American democracy. Why were parents and ordinary citizens willing to face injury and death to achieve superior educational opportunities? Why were white Southerners ready to inflict great harm to exclude African Americans? Grappling with such questions is a formidable task, and it has much to do with the relationships between minority groups and the larger transformation of American education and democracy at mid-century.

In the larger society of 1950, public schooling was a central part of American culture and was perceived by parents as vital to their children's future. The transformation of public secondary education during the first third of the twentieth century symbolized the extent to which schooling had become a strategic part of the national experience in 1950. From about 1890 to 1935, the American high school was transformed from an elite, private institution into a public one attended by white children en masse. Educational opportunities were expanding; publicly and privately supported schemes to locate the talented burgeoned, and scholarship and loan programs for those students were provided with equal enthusiasm. Minorities knew they were being cheated of access to the new educational opportunities. As the public high school, only a marginal factor in American life at the dawn of the twentieth century, became the "people's college" by mid-century, such exclusion reflected the larger system of racial subordination.[6]

African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans in particular were virtually excluded from this important transformation. For example, whereas 54 percent of southern white children of high school age were enrolled in public high schools by 1935, more than eight out of every ten African American children of high school age were not enrolled in secondary schools. As late as 1968, the average schooling for Mexican Americans in Texas was 4.7 years.

By 1950, the inequality in educational achievement between white students and minority students had deepened since 1900, when very few Americans of

5. Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 5.

6. James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 187.

any race or gender attended high schools, and formal education was only marginally a factor in national economic and social life. As ethnic minority groups and women sensed a growing gap in educational opportunities, campaigns to provide better educational opportunities for their children became a critical social issue and a central plank in the larger platform for civil and political equality. Lacking access, for the most part, to voting power, political offices, finance, and the higher reaches of industry, parents, community leaders, and ordinary citizens focused on the right to equal educational opportunity as the centerpiece of the larger crusade for justice and equality. As Melba Pattillo Beals recalled, "Back then, I naively believed that if we could end segregation in the schools, all barriers of inequality would fall. If you had asked me in 1957 what I expected, I would have told you that by this time [1994] our struggle for human rights would have been won."[7] Getting the best education possible for their children motivated ordinary citizens to show extraordinary grit, courage, and endurance, challenging Jim Crow and other legal and customary forms of racial, ethnic, gender, and disability subordination.

The crusades for equal educational opportunity that began in Topeka, Kansas, Farmville, Virginia, and Little Rock, Arkansas, spread across the nation, aiding various struggles for learning and self-improvement. In 1966, African American students at Northern High in Detroit called a general strike to protest the failure of urban schools and to demand better educational opportunities. Mexican American high school students in Crystal City, Texas, went on strike in 1968, demanding bilingual education, more humane treatment from white teachers, and curricular reform to include the history and culture of Mexicans in the Southwest. Similarly, in the fall of 1968, approximately thirty thousand African American and Latino students embarked on a sustained boycott to protest the quality of education provided by the schools as well as the treatment accorded students by white teachers, counselors, and administrators. Their proposals for school reform included a demand for community participation in school programs, more African American and Latino school administrators, African American and Latino history courses, and more homework for stu-

7. Beals, *Warriors Don't Cry*, 3.

dents. Minority students were demanding excellence in education long before politicians used it as a political football in the 1980s.

The grassroots school reform movements of the 1960s spilled into the 1970s and expanded among different minority populations. The movement for instruction in a language other than English received a boost from the U.S. Supreme Court when Chinese Americans in California sued successfully for ESL (English as a Second Language) programs. Feminist leaders pushed for laws and programs to give female students educational equality. In 1972, the U.S. Congress passed Title IX, which prohibited the awarding of federal grants to programs that discriminated on the basis of gender. In 1976, the crusade for equal educational opportunity embraced children with disabilities. As with racial integration, bilingual education, and Title IX, the movement to provide resources and training to make learning possible for children with disabilities challenged the simple beliefs and uniform rules about public education and democracy embodied in the dominant culture at mid-century.

From our contemporary angle of vision, perceptions are sharply conflicting about what has happened in communities where equal educational plans have been implemented. Instead of bringing about better race/ethnic and gender relations and improved academic performance, many conservatives argue, the historic Brown decision and the resulting campaigns for equality have heightened gender and racial tensions, fostered white flight from urban school districts, and caused a general deterioration in standards of behavior and schoolwork. Conservatives maintain that the harm to public education has been so great that the attempt to integrate the nation's schools has been a tragic failure. From this viewpoint, the crusade for equal educational opportunity is defined as a burden, a social policy to force into schools preconceived notions about racial and gender equality at the expense of academic excellence. President Ronald Reagan's campaign for "Excellence in Education" counterpoised excellence as virtually the opposite of equality. Educators and scholars began to debate whether the nation could have both equality and excellence.

Clearly these thinkers did not fully understand or appreciate why sixteen-year-old Barbara Johns led the student strike at Moton High School in Farmville, Virginia, in 1951 or why Mae Bertha and Matthew Carter encouraged their children to risk physical and psychological punishment in pursuit of a better

education. Further, they seem to have no memory of the students in Chicago and Detroit who went on strike in the 1960s demanding more homework and advanced-placement courses while decrying the practice of social promotion. Was this not a demand for academic excellence? The pursuit of academic excellence and the demand for first-rate educational facilities were the underlying causes of the crusade for equal educational opportunity, not the pursuit of liberal social policies for their intrinsic value. Moreover, the demand for academic excellence and better educational opportunities by various minority communities predated by several decades the "Excellence in Education" campaign of the 1980s. How conservatives and neoconservatives could become so disconnected from the core values of the crusade for equal educational opportunities underscores the need for a national conversation about education and democracy in the twenty-first century.

Some members of minority communities became increasingly disenchanted with the results of the crusade for equal educational opportunity. Minority leaders brought to the campaign different cultural values and different political assumptions. Most, of course, were related to power and control over education, since they had come to view white control as the essence of racial subordination and segregation. Many minorities wanted desegregation to be a process of sharing power and control over education. They resisted attempts by local school boards to close schools located in their communities and force minority students to be bused to the formerly all white schools. They wanted assurances that minority principals, teachers, and service workers would not lose their jobs during school desegregation. They also wanted some community control over, and participation in, curricular programs. Finally, they wanted promises that minority students would not be "tracked" into lower-level classes, a process that amounted to racial segregation and subordination within "desegregated" schools.

Hence, minority group leaders viewed the school desegregation process as an opportunity to gain some power and control over local educational systems and to end their long-standing subordination within the educational system. Over the past five decades, ethnic, minority, and feminist campaigns for equal educational opportunity have challenged and redefined the simple, dominant beliefs about democracy and education that characterized America at mid-

century. The theory of democracy and education that then prevailed was informed by conceptions of social homogeneity, simplicity, and an overarching common identity of whiteness, rather than social diversity, complexity, and multiple identities. Most Americans in 1950 grew up with the idealized model of the town meeting, where people from similar backgrounds came together to debate the common good within parameters so narrow as to virtually exclude women, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. The heterogeneous civil rights struggles of the past decades have significantly challenged this conception of democracy. What we now face are cultural, political, educational, and legal debates over the extent to which our democracy can or ought to absorb heterogeneity and cultural pluralism. In the face of increasing diversity, a simple, homogeneous model of democracy and education will fail. Young Americans need to learn how to accept diversity, negotiate conflicts, and form coalitions if they are to be leaders in an increasingly heterogeneous and complex society. One of the long-term contributions of the recent struggles for educational equality may be the shift in our understanding of the role of public schooling in a diverse democracy.[8]

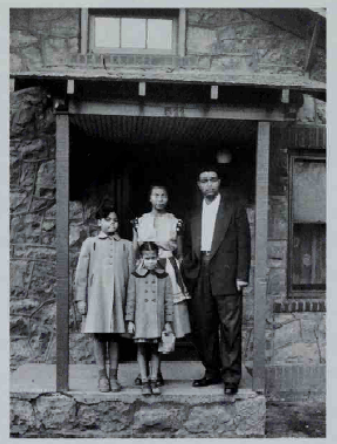
In 1954, Edwin R. Murrow devoted an entire half hour of his CBS television program *See It Now* to an effort to understand attitudes toward the *Brown* decision of certain persons in Gastonia, North Carolina, and Nachitoches, Louisiana. An African American boy in Nachitoches said of the decision, "I think it's the wonderfullest thing that's ever happened to America." The choices that we now make regarding public education will determine the wisdom of his opinion.

8. Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890–1940* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998).

"Why Don't You Go to School with Us?"

We [wanted] what democracy had said was ours.
And what our Bill of Rights and our Constitution
had said belonged to us. We wanted equality, definitely.

SEVERITA LARA



Rev. Oliver Brown, plaintiff in landmark Supreme Court case Brown v. Board of Education, *with his daughter Linda and family in Topeka, Kansas.*

In the 1950s, America's schools were bursting with the promise of a new generation, the postwar baby boomers. It was up to the schools to inoculate these children against disease and to prepare them for a nuclear attack. Schools were also expected to propel the nation's youth toward a technological future. Three out of five students graduated in 1950, and almost 50 percent of them went on to college. Yet these gains masked profound inequalities. "The promise of the public schools from the time of Jefferson, Horace Mann, and the early proponents of common schooling was that all students were entitled to a quality education and to be educated together," says Jay Heubert, an expert on law and school reform. "In the 1950s, however, that simply wasn't the case." Adds Marcia Greenberger, head of the National Women's Law Center, "There were no teams in athletics for young women, no scholarships for women in athletics in college. There were many professional schools not open to women. Many of the prestigious colleges were closed to women." Jose Angel Gutierrez, a Chicano civil rights leader from Crystal City, Texas, recalls, "There was rigid segregation within the building.

Fourth- and fifth-grade classes at the segregated, all-white Van Buren School in Topeka, Kansas, 1949.

Fifth- and sixth-grade classes at the segregated, all-black Monroe School in Topeka, Kansas, 1949.

within the classrooms. In other words, English One was basically all Anglo, and English Five was basically all Mexican."

In 1950, African American students were segregated by law in seventeen states. Mexican Americans attended school an average of 5.6 years. And 72 percent of disabled school-age children were not enrolled. It took a great wave of education reform, from the 1950s through the 1970s, to open America's schools to everyone. This crusade was led by activists, parents, and students themselves. Severita Lara, former Crystal City student leader and mayor of Crystal City from 1995 to 1997, remembers, "We weren't looking to grab or get things that didn't belong to us, just what democracy had said was ours. And what our Bill of Rights and our

Constitution had said belonged to us.... We wanted equality, definitely."

The modern fight for equality in the nation's schools began in Topeka, the capital of Kansas, and it hinged on the issue of race. Topeka's million-dollar high school was integrated, with African Americans and whites attending class together. Yet most school activities were segregated. Blacks and whites had separate proms, separate student governments, and, until 1950, even separate sports teams and cheerleading squads. At the elementary level, Topeka's schools were strictly segregated: there were eighteen public schools for white children, and four for African Americans. Linda Brown Thompson, daughter of the lead plaintiff in the sem-

Linda Brown's kindergarten class at the segregated Monroe School. (Linda Brown is standing in the top row, fourth from the right.)

inal Supreme Court case *Brown v. Board of Education*, remembers what it was like to attend a segregated school. "I lived in a neighborhood that was integrated and I had playmates of all nationalities—Native Americans, Caucasians—that I played with, Hispanic children. And then when school started, we would go these opposite directions. And of course your playmates you played with every day wanted to know, 'Well, why don't you go to school with us?'"

Shut out of their neighborhood school, Linda Brown and her sister had to walk through a railroad yard to catch a bus to the all-black Monroe School, two miles from home. African American parents in Topeka had fought this discrimination for years. "They went to the school board, they talked to the school board, they did everything that they could in order to get them to understand, hey, our kids are deserving of the same type of education that you are giving to everybody else," recalls former Topeka student Don Oden. "We pay taxes here. We are citizens here. Of course, the school board at that time felt they were giving us, you know, that old 'separate but equal' type of thing—which really turned out to be 'separate but unequal.'"

Despite inequalities, African American schools in Topeka and elsewhere were often an important resource for the African American community and a source of employment for African American professionals. Barbara Ross, a former teacher in the Topeka schools, says, "The teachers were very qualified, more so than in the white schools. Most of the black teachers had their master's

[degrees]. Other jobs were not open for our race of people." Adds historian Vanessa Siddle Walker, "Desegregation had to happen. It was imperative. It was morally right. It was constitutionally right. However, we cannot talk just about facilities and resources and the constitutional and moral reasons we had to desegregate, and discount the learning environments that were present in those schools." Another plaintiff in the Brown case, Topeka parent Vivian Scales, says, "It wasn't that we wanted our children to go to school with white children. That was not the gist of it at all. We wanted our children to have a better and equal education, which we knew that they were not getting."

ABOVE *Vivian Scales, Kansas plaintiff in* Brown v. Board of Education. *She joined with twelve other Topeka parents to sue for desegregation of the local schools.*

FACING *NAACP membership drive.*

In 1896, the U.S. Supreme Court had ruled that segregation was constitutional as long as separate facilities were equal. Since the 1930s, lawyers for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had traveled throughout the South, gathering evidence to prove that segregated schools were never equal and that black schools were often desperately underfunded. By ending inequality in schools, they hoped to bring down all segregation in America.

In 1950, having laid a foundation of protests and legal challenges, the NAACP was ready to take its case to the highest court

in the land. That year, the NAACP enlisted thirteen black parents in Topeka to serve as plaintiffs in the case they were building. They advised the parents to try to enroll their children in white schools near their homes. That fall, the Reverend Oliver Brown walked his eight-year-old daughter Linda to the Summer School. Although brief, it would be one of the most fateful journeys of the twentieth century. Linda Brown Thompson recalls vividly, "I remember walking up the steps and how big the building seemed to me, you know, this excitement inside of me ... and I remember him going inside with the principal, and talking to him. Being young, you know, I really didn't know what was going on, but I knew something was wrong, because walking home I could feel the tension, you know, when he took me by the hand, that something was going on." Each of the Topeka children was turned away.

The case, filed as *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, went to the Supreme Court, where it was argued by Thurgood Marshall and other attorneys from the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. They spoke on behalf of plaintiffs not only in Topeka, Kansas, but also in South Carolina, Delaware, Virginia, and the District of Columbia. On May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren announced the court's unanimous decision: "It is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity ... is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.... Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." Linda Brown Thompson recalls, "I was at school the day the decision

On May 17, 1954, the Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, strikes down the doctrine of "separate but equal" in American education.

was handed down, Mother was home. I remember her talking about this and being so excited, then when my father came in, he was overjoyed. My mother said that she remembers him embracing us and saying, 'Thanks be to God for this,' and just being overwhelmed." Plaintiff Vivian Scales also recalls her excitement: "I was at home and I was preparing supper. And the phone started ringing, you know, and I don't know whether I ever finished preparing supper or not because we were so elated, and one was calling the other one and the other one calling, the line would be busy and it was a jubilant day. It really was."

"It was a jubilant day. It really was."
—Vivian Scales, plaintiff in Brown v. Board of Education

In Topeka and other cities in border states, schools tended to comply with the decision. In 1954, Linda Brown was entering a junior high school that was already integrated. Her little sister would attend the newly integrated Sumner Elementary School. But integration had its costs to African Americans. Over the next two decades, more than thirty thousand African American teachers in the South would be displaced. Historian James Anderson says, "When African American teachers are kicked out of the school system, when African American principals are fired or demoted, in the name of integration, when you lose that kind of representation, from the African American vantage point we are not achieving desegregation. We may be achieving racial balance, we may be undoing the separate part of it, but we at the same time are exacerbating the unequal part of it."

Yet when the Supreme Court decision was announced in 1954, most of the South defied it. Parents and politicians vowed that white children would never sit next to black children in class. Lindsay Almond, governor of Virginia, emphatically stated, "There will be no enforced integration in Virginia." Fumed Orville Faubus, governor of Arkansas: "I will not force my people to integrate against their will. I believe in the democratic processes and principles of government wherein the people determine the problems on a local level, which is their right." Desegregation policy expert Gary Orfield explains: "The federal government versus the states was the debate, whether or not we were interfering with states' rights. And the most fervent opponents of the federal gov-

ernment getting into education were those people in the South who were running the apartheid school systems." In 1957, Governor Faubus of Arkansas called out the National Guard rather than allow nine black teenagers to integrate Little Rock's Central High School. His challenge was met by President Dwight Eisenhower, who sent federal troops to enforce the law. Yet integration depended on the courage of black children willing to take the first steps through the schoolhouse door. Historian James Anderson says, "Their sense was, we are going into an environment where we are not wanted. The teachers are going to be hostile. The students think of us as a despised race. We cannot make friends. We will be isolated and discriminated against. And the question for African

Black and white girls stare at each other in Fort Myer, Virginia, school following desegregation.