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A Bi-Generational Narrative in the Brown v. Board Decision

ADIA M. HARVEY AND WILLIAM B. HARVEY

Part I—Life as a Brown Baby, by William B. Harvey

It would be a slight exaggeration to say that I clearly remember the Brown v. Board of Education decision, since I was only six years old at the time this landmark legal edict was handed down. But precocious child that I was, I was about to complete second grade, and, like every other little colored child in the state of North Carolina, I was in a racially segregated school at the time.

What made school a special place for me was that it was across the road from the campus of Elizabeth City State Teachers College, which was the alma mater of my second grade teacher, and most of the other teachers in my town, including my father. We didn’t actually go on the college campus very often—sometimes there was a special field trip to see a play or listen to a debate. But most of the time, we just stared in awe and admiration at those cool college kids who dashed here and there, back and forth, in a world that we could only imagine.

Just seeing those earnest young men and women inspired some of us to reach for similar heights. A college education was a rarity in North
Carolina at the time, even for white people. So being in such close proximity to an institution of higher learning—one that I could legitimately aspire to attend—provided me with a sense of the possible that shaped my life at a very early point.

Even at six, though, I was keenly aware of segregation and what it meant. Our world, though nurturing and supportive, was also very tightly defined. Having attended kindergarten and first grade in a Catholic school that was two blocks from our house, I had been taught by white nuns. I remember them as being nice to me, encouraging and supportive, which is pretty important when you are the smallest person in your class. I also remember, however, that in the parent-teacher meetings, when my mother went to check on the progress of my sister and me, the interaction pattern was just a little different with the nuns than it was with the other people in my neighborhood.

It was the same interaction pattern that I noticed when, with my mother, or father, or even my grandmother, we ventured out of our neighborhood to go downtown or to the supermarket—circumstances when we would encounter white people, who I noticed were always in charge. Southern children, especially colored children, were brought up to be polite and always respectful of their elders. When we addressed them, we said sir and ma’am as an acknowledgement of their age and experience. It confused me then, when on a trip to the five-and-ten with my grandmother, she endeavored to get the attention of the white girl behind the counter by raising her hand and saying to her, “Please ma’am, could you give me some help.”

Of course I didn’t say anything at the time—it wouldn’t have been proper—but on the walk home, I asked Grandma why she said ma’am to someone so much younger than she, someone who according to the rules of respect that I had been taught, should have been saying ma’am to her. In her own inimitable way, my grandmother explained that was just the way it was between white people and colored people, but she declared that it wouldn’t always be that way—of that she was absolutely certain.

Her assurances notwithstanding, it sure looked and felt like it was always going to always be that way. The next school year came and went, and so did the next one and the next one and the one after that, and there were no noticeable changes in school attendance patterns, or in the world that I knew. In fact, the existing state of affairs was vividly confirmed when I was in the sixth grade. My uncle had built a new house in a different part of town, and he lived immediately adjacent to a white
neighborhood. This certainly wasn’t unusual in the South, and not too long afterwards, Moses, a friend of mine from school, moved into the same neighborhood.

Right after Moses and his family moved into their house, construction began on a new school building directly across the street. Since the school that we attended was about two miles from where Moses lived, the question on all of our minds was whether he would be able to attend the new school when it was completed, since most of the people in the area were white. About a year later, the city fathers provided the answer, and it was a resounding NO. Every morning, Moses had to get up, leave his home, pretend that the school for white children wasn’t there, and walk or ride his bike to the school that, by virtue of his race, he was forced to attend. The segregation laws may not still have been on the books in the state of North Carolina, but the practice clearly had not changed. The year was 1958, four years after the *Brown v. Board* decision.

I had an epiphany of sorts the next year on a school field trip. Our teachers had organized a trip to the University of North Carolina planetarium in Chapel Hill, which one day a month allowed the little colored children of the state to visit the facility. My classmates and I witnessed various kinds of astronomical phenomena and I was quite taken by the experience, until it was time to go. As we walked back across the campus to our school buses, it occurred to me that I could not be a student at this wonderful institution, which was supported by taxes paid by my parents. I wondered then, what the learned professors were saying to their students, in political science, and ethics and history, about the incredible duality that existed outside the windows of the classroom. I didn’t wonder long because I knew that they weren’t saying anything at all about it. They were quite content with their lives in a world and a nation that provided liberty and justice for some. I had met some of the professors at Elizabeth City State, who always told us that knowledge overcomes ignorance and was the best weapon in the fight against injustice. This was the first time that I clearly understood that the white higher education community—the academic elite, people who were clearly smart enough to know better—were just as much in support of segregation as the most ignorant, unschooled racists. It was a bitter pill to swallow.

The next year, 1960, was a turning point in my life. After attempting for several years to find a teaching position in the North, my father was finally successful. He had resolved to move his family out of the South, into the promised land of the North, and a job offer in New Jersey finally made that happen. Prior to our move in August, however,
four brave students at North Carolina A & T University in Greensboro, North Carolina decided to sit-in at a local lunch counter in the spring of that year to protest segregated facilities in that city. This activity was incredibly courageous, as it easily could have resulted in their deaths, and it was replicated by African American students at other institutions, including those at Elizabeth City State Teachers College.

Rather than change their practice of refusing to serve African Americans, the local Woolworth’s decided that it would simply wait the students out until the end of the academic year when they would leave for summer vacation. In turn, the leaders of the African American community instituted a boycott of Woolworth’s and other downtown stores that practiced racial discrimination. The Civil Rights movement had arrived. The South was going to change, as my grandmother had predicted, but as it turned out, my family wasn’t going to be around long enough to benefit from it.

Segregation was mean and ugly and humiliating. It was a state of affairs that made you know your place and that kept you in your place. And if you were colored or Negro or Black or African American, your place was at the bottom. I remember separate toilets and water fountains, being excluded from municipal swimming pools, movie theaters, and amusement parks. I remember reading from books that had been sent over from the white schools when they received new ones. Sometimes this seems like it was a million years ago; sometimes it seems like it was yesterday. Anyway, I confess to being amazed but not amused when we moved to New Jersey, because the neighborhood that we lived in was just as segregated as the one we left in North Carolina. And while the local high school that my older sister and I went to was racially integrated, the neighborhood grammar school that my younger sister attended was all Black, except for the principal. Apparently the people in the North didn’t know about Brown v. Board either.

When I took the placement tests to start at my new school, the guidance counselors were rather surprised that I did well enough to qualify for a college prep curriculum as a twelve-year-old coming from North Carolina. They had no sense of the unwavering expectations of the African American teachers in my former community that I do well in my studies, and the loss of this phenomenon might be the only negative aspect that is associated with the ending of segregation. The only opportunities that African American teachers had, even those with advanced degrees and preparation that sometimes far exceeded their white peers, were in the colored schools.
So these teachers prepared us well, motivating and inspiring us to be ready for the time when we would be able to compete directly, head to head, against whites. And while they urged us to look forward to that time, they also warned us to be very careful because whites were known to be small-minded and violent. That was evident in the way they conducted themselves. My high school experience, in an integrated setting, was most valuable for confirming what my teachers had told me repeatedly: the color of your skin doesn’t determine what kind of person that you can become.

It was twenty-three years before I returned to North Carolina for a significant period of time. We had made occasional visits for family events, but for the most part we had all willingly and easily adjusted to living in the North. In that intervening period, I had finished graduate school, married, and started a family. My spouse, who is from Philadelphia, was less than enthused when I suggested that we move from New York to North Carolina so I could accept a position on the faculty at one of the predominantly white institutions. The “New South” was supposed to be booming, having shed much of its racist trappings, and clearly the opportunity to be a professor at an institution where, because of my race, I most likely would not have gained admission as a student, was evidence of a major change in the cultural patterns and values of the region.

When we went to enroll my daughter in the local public schools, we found them to be completely integrated among whites and African Americans, and they even had a few Asians and Hispanics. In a kind of generational, reverse déjà vu, the school authorities at first were a little reluctant to enroll my daughter in the gifted program. After all, she was transferring in from New York, and the quality of education in that part of the world was considered to be a bit suspect. But when her test scores were analyzed, the doubts were settled and she went on to receive an education that prepared her well enough to receive a bachelor’s degree from Spelman College and ultimately a doctorate from Johns Hopkins University. My father had retired in New Jersey after completing his career, and when he visited us in North Carolina and attended my daughter’s school on grandparents day, he was completely amazed. A school in his home state where the color of the students was not an issue was something that he thought he would never see.

So, fifty years after Brown, some progress has been made, but not nearly enough. In some urban centers, particularly in the North and Midwest, schools are as segregated, and sometimes even more so, than
they were before the decision was rendered. An incredible amount of work still must be done in changing attitudes and changing practices if the spirit of this landmark ruling is going to be realized. Policy makers, opinion shapers, and community leaders must work hand-in-hand to make certain that every child receives the best education possible. This is a legacy that we must leave to those who have struggled before us, as well as for those who will come after us.

Part II—*Brown v. Board of Education: A Contemporary Analysis*, by Adia M. Harvey

The last half of the twentieth century has been marked by unprecedented social change. Various underprivileged groups have made rapid advances toward social equality over the last fifty years of the twentieth century. African Americans in particular are one group that has experienced drastic changes in their economic, legal, political, and social rights during the close of the century. Perhaps no legal milestone illustrates these changes better than *Brown v. Board of Education*, the landmark Supreme Court case that ruled that “separate but equal” was a fallacy.

Growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, my educational experiences were shaped in a decidedly postsegregationist world, but one that still wrestled with issues of integration, race relations, equality, and the consummate challenge of untangling all these complicated but interconnected issues in the context of the educational system. My generation was not the one that faced the daunting task of integrating schools while white students threw rocks and the National Guard stood outside. I was not a member of the first generation to be bused from segregated neighborhoods to predominantly white schools. I was not part of the cohort who transitioned from Black schools where teachers knew their names, families, backgrounds, and the nature of their communities, to school environments where white teachers ridiculed these Black schools and their students in accordance with prevailing racial stereotypes.

My generation began our journey through the educational system well after the brave students who faced hostile and irate white students, parents, and teachers who were fundamentally opposed to integration. But we faced a different set of issues, many of which are reflected in the contemporary research that examines the current picture of race and education in the United States. This essay attempts to connect personal experiences to more general issues around race and education, and to
place both in the context of growing up in the aftermath of the Brown v. Board decision.

One of the issues raised in the aftermath of integration is that one advantage of segregated environments disappeared as a consequence of integration. Specifically, in all-Black settings, students were surrounded by teachers who appreciated their circumstances and did not believe that their race made them intellectually inferior. Despite poverty and disadvantages, Black students were taught by educators who believed in their intelligence and capacity for learning. In contrast, integration placed Black students into classrooms with teachers who frequently doubted their intellectual acuity and, overall, their ability to learn. While the facilities were better in integrated schools, Black students were often thrust into learning environments that ranged from dismissive to outright hostile.

I began elementary school in 1982, almost thirty years after the Brown decision. While I didn’t enter an integrated school system that held the same vestiges of overt racism and segregation that existed in the late 1950s and early 1960s, it is noteworthy that my interactions with teachers and peers still bore some tinges of racial bias. Isolated incidents still stand out: the teacher who told me that my mother was not to check over my homework anymore because it would give me an “unfair advantage,” the sixth grade teacher who openly doubted that I had really written my essay because it seemed too articulate. The unfortunate implication here is that in both cases, teachers failed to display the encouragement and to promote a learning environment that expected that an African American child could and should succeed.

Another related issue that stems from integration is that of cultural isolation, of Black students coming from all-Black schools to being the only Black student in their school. This can produce a sense of alienation and cultural isolation which can adversely affect Black students even as they are in school systems with superior resources and opportunities. In her memoirs, cultural critic bell hooks discusses experiencing this sense of isolation at the college level, when she left her all-Black neighborhood to attend Stanford University. Though hooks describes this experience at the college level, the sense of feeling isolated from familiar faces or from one’s cultural background can exist at all levels.

My own experiences from elementary to high school reflect this. Often the lone Black student in classes, I experienced many of the post-integration issues that routinely fall to Black students: being called upon by teachers to testify about my race, expected to refute (or conform to)
stereotypes about Blacks, to answer questions that begin with the ubiquitous phrase, “Why do Black people . . . ,” or refuting erroneous or racially biased comments. I faced a barrage of these comments and questions from all sides. In institutions where there had rarely existed a critical mass of Black students to promote the equal contact that has the potential to minimize stereotypes and misunderstandings, these sorts of questions and the underlying cultural displacement they produce are commonplace.

Another major issue that has been given attention in the post-Brown educational environment is the issue of an oppositional culture among Black students that undermines academic achievement. Fordham and Ogbu (1986) first popularized this concept with their case study of Black students in a Washington, DC high school. Fordham and Ogbu argued that among Black students, an oppositional culture existed wherein scholastic success and educational attainment were viewed as “acting white.” Consequently, Black students eschewed educational success in deference to the oppositional culture that derided academic achievement. This argument has been further expanded to suggest that specific cultural factors among African Americans explain their educational disparity with whites; in short, that if Black Americans do not succeed academically to the same extent as their white counterparts, perhaps cultural norms that stigmatize educational attainment are to blame.

This type of rhetoric holds particular importance in a post-Brown environment. Its subtle “blame the victim” implications suggest that if Black students are not succeeding at this point, after schools have been integrated, after they have the same opportunities as their white peers, then perhaps the best explanation for the deficit lies in cultural causes. This thinking masks the inequalities that are still inherent within integrated social settings, such as the school system, the workplace, the economic structure, and so on. It is also erroneous to generalize by suggesting that gaps between Black and white educational achievement can be blamed on cultural deficiencies, when all Black students do not have the advantages of well-financed integrated schools, and when historically, Blacks have always stressed educational attainment as a means to economic and social advancement. Perhaps the biggest problem with the oppositional culture explanation is that it masks the reality that American culture, at large, is an anti-intellectual one. Consider that President George W. Bush won a great deal of his popularity from the fact that he did not appear to be too smart, and noted in a debate that his wife “speaks English better than I do.”
My personal experience with this issue refutes Fordham and Ogbu’s assessment of the oppositional culture. Among my classmates, some Black students were in fact taunted for “acting white,” but these were students who rarely associated and even avoided interacting with other Black students; rather they attempted to curry favor with popular white students, not those who were academically successful regardless of their race. Black students recognized that some Black students did well in school, others did not. Furthermore, in informal discussions it became clear that some Black students’ interpretations of differential academic success among Black students were attributed to class rather than racialized differences. In other words, many students felt that middle- and upper-class Black students who did well in school had a better chance of advancing than those from working-class backgrounds. This type of analysis reflects a rather sophisticated analysis that for Black students with economic means, educational attainment was a more reliable path for social mobility.

A final issue that has been linked to the passage of Brown has to do with the degree of relevance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Before Brown, these schools were where many Blacks went to obtain higher education. Due to segregation, few Blacks had access to predominantly white colleges and universities, even when they were academically qualified and could afford the tuition. With the Brown decision, however, we see the enrollment numbers of students at HBCUs dropping dramatically. Now that Black students have the opportunity to attend Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Princeton, Brown, and other Ivy League universities, some are less likely to see a need to attend Spelman, Morehouse, Hampton, Howard, Xavier, and others. With access to the formerly restricted schools that comprise the upper echelon of the academic elite, there is, among some Black students, a perception that HBCUs have outlived their usefulness.

For me, this debate underscores one of the key paradoxes of the Brown decision. While it is true that enrollments for HBCUs are declining, these schools have higher retention rates than their white counterparts in graduating Black students. More importantly, the majority of Black Americans who pursue terminal degrees—PhDs, MDs, JDs—are graduates of historically Black undergraduate institutions. So while a deceptively small number of Black students attend these schools, those who do are disproportionately more likely to gain advanced degrees.

I would argue that the continued success of HBCUs in successfully educating Black students speaks to one of the major issues that exist in
the aftermath of Brown. That is, even as schools are increasingly racially integrated, the vestiges of inequality still linger in these environments. Integration has not erased fundamental social inequality. Merely placing Blacks in white schools has not erased perceptions that Blacks are intellectually inferior, less able to learn, and, ultimately, marginal members of society. While integration has had its advantages, it has not dismantled the racist thinking that is embedded in many social institutions, of which the educational system is just one.

It was this awareness that compelled me to attend an HBCU. My experience in integrated schools from kindergarten to twelfth grade had a direct impact on my determination to attend a historically Black college. The culmination of the sense of cultural alienation, the frustration of being the only Black student in academically gifted courses, the weariness that stemmed from being expected to explain Black people to curious but disengaged white students and teachers, the absence of courses and course material that examined diverse racial perspectives and addressed the complexity and diversity of Black Americans—all these factors took their toll.

I enrolled at Spelman College and became, for the first (and probably only) time in my life, part of the majority. Here, no one expected me to speak for Blacks as a group. No one expected that as a Black student I would be unable to meet the rigors of the curriculum; in fact, professors often expected more from me than I thought was fair or reasonable. At Spelman, courses about Black people, particularly Black women, were not only part of the curriculum, they were required for graduation. It is a testament to the paradoxes of Brown that my experiences in an integrated though still unequal school system drove me to derive the comfort, support, and familiarity that students in segregated pre-Brown environments took for granted.

The main point I want to offer from this essay is that years after Brown, school integration has become an accepted fact of life in the U.S. Despite the fact that many schools remain segregated, Brown ensured that the stark racial separation that characterized the educational system up to 1954 was no longer constitutionally defensible. What needs to occur at this point is a continued dismantling of the structural, institutional inequalities that continue to exist in integrated schools. Integration itself is not sufficient for creating racial equality. Within educational institutions, we have to erode the continued remnants of racial inequality that prevent integration from reaching its potential of being an equalizing force.
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