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The *Brown* decision made a giant step forward, but to keep from backsliding, educators must begin to *live* the spirit of the Supreme Court's ruling.

Nearly 30 years ago, on May 17, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down the historic *Brown* decision, which ruled that racially segregated public schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. In its unanimous decision, written by Chief Justice Earl Warren, the Court stated that:

In the field of public education the doctrine of "separate but equal" has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal.

In the struggle for democracy, this momentous decision clearly ranks among such great documents as the Magna Carta, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights. The

**Educational Trends and U.S. Commitments Since the Brown Decision**

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simple and eloquent language of the *Brown* decision articulated for us again the ideals of American democracy, by stating that the opportunities for a constructive role in a democratic society must be made available to all without regard to race or color.

The *Brown* decision is not only a strong positive restatement of the responsibility—indeed the obligation—of a democratic society to protect the rights of all of its citizens; it is also a total acceptance of the Jeffersonian belief that a solid public education available to all is the essential foundation of a functioning democracy. A powerful constitutional, legal, psychological, and human document, the decision was also an important statement of the critical role of public education in maintaining the stability of the American democratic system. In this regard, the words of the *Brown* decision are direct and explicit:

Today, education is perhaps the most important function of state and local governments. Compulsory school attendance laws and the great expenditures for education both demonstrate our recognition of the importance of education to our democratic society. . . . Today it is a principal instrument in awakening the child to cultural values, in preparing him for later professional training, and in helping him to adjust normally to his environment. In these days, 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, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

In addressing itself to the specific problem of the effects of racial segregation on the educational opportunity for minority students, the Court was even more explicit. Noting the damage that segregated schools inflict upon minority students, the Court asserted that:

To separate them from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.

In developing this human concern for the welfare and future of minority children, the Supreme Court quoted the specific educational finding of the Kansas federal court:

A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn. Segregation with the sanction of law, therefore, has a tendency to

retard the educational and mental development of Negro children and to deprive them of some of the benefits they would receive in a racially integrated school system.

From this statement, the Supreme Court arrived at the definitive conclusion of the *Brown* decision: "Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

### The Struggle Begins

This landmark decision changed the pattern of race relations in the United States—particularly in the southern states. Its clear assertion of fundamental social and psychological truths and basic human values cleared the way for the removal of all state laws that required or permitted racial segregation in public accommodations, transportation, and recreational facilities. The *Brown* decision made it possible for blacks to defy the remaining vestiges of flagrant racial cruelties through the nonviolent civil disobedience movement so admirably directed by the late Martin Luther King, Jr. And it made it possible for the executive and legislative branches of the federal government to become active partners, without apology, in the ongoing struggle for racial justice.

Ten years after the *Brown* decision, the U. S. Congress passed the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment. And, in 1965, it passed the Voting Rights Act, which significantly increased the participation of all minorities in the political process.

Without question, the *Brown* decision and its consequences have solidified the foundations of American democracy for the benefit of all Americans. The early successes of the Civil Rights movement in the wake of the *Brown* Decision motivated other groups, such as women, native Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and gays, to seek unqualified justice and the removal of remaining patterns of discrimination. Ironically, although the specific issue presented to the Supreme Court that resulted in the *Brown* decision concerned the constitutionality of racially segregated public schools, the beneficial consequences of the decision were more pronounced, pervasive, and observable in aspects of society other than public education.

### Where We Stand Now

In attempting to assess the effects of the *Brown* decision on American educational institutions, a pattern of inconsistencies and anomalies become apparent. For example:

- While laws requiring or permitting segregated schools no longer exist, *de facto* segregated schools continue to exist and seem to be proliferating.

- An increased number of private schools and academies, sponsored by various religious denominations, are becoming havens for white students whose parents seek to avoid sending their children to desegregated public schools.

- According to the latest statistics, a higher percentage of black children attend nonsegregated schools in southern states than in northern urban communities.

- In fact, a higher percentage of black students attend *de facto* segregated schools in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, and Los Angeles than were attending such racially homogeneous schools at the time of the *Brown* decision.

- While traditionally—white colleges do not now exclude black students, publicly supported traditionally—black colleges are unable or unwilling to attract white students. They rationalize their defense of the racial status quo and justify their continued segregated existence with the need to educate black students who cannot meet the admission standards of traditionally—white colleges.

- Ironically, the most racially desegregated area of American higher education is varsity athletics. This probably indicates that college faculties do not hold athletes to the same educational standards that they maintain for other students.

Clearly, pervasive and formidable resistance to genuine educational compliance with the *Brown* decision exists today. This is particularly true in northern cities with a high percentage of ghetto blacks. An increasing number of white middle-class parents have abandoned the public schools and have enrolled their children in suburban schools or in private and parochial schools. There are indications that affluent black families are also following

this trend. The result is that urban public schools have now become predominantly black and segregated.

Thirty years after the *Brown* decision, the subtle and flagrant excuses for resegregating American public schools—the anti-busing propaganda, the resurgence of the worship of neighborhood schools (which are segregated in the light of residential segregation)—all of these erode the democratic foundation of American public education. To the extent that desegregation succeeds, it in effect repeals the historic *Brown* decision.

### The Purpose of Education

As a member of the educational establishment for all my adult life, I am embarrassed to admit that educators as a whole, with some notable exceptions, have defaulted in helping our society understand that a segregated educational system is not only inimical to a functioning democracy, but also makes it difficult, if not impossible, to attain the important goals of education.

The purpose of education is to free the human mind of ignorance, superstition, irrational fears and hatreds, tribalisms, parochialisms, and hostilities that interfere with the ability of human beings to interact constructively. A truly educated person must be able to understand the commonality of human experience and aspirations and to empathize with other human beings. The perpetuation of racial and ethnic prejudices counters these educational goals and values. Racially segregated schools reinforce such prejudices.

Educators above all others—probably including the clergy—should know that racially segregated schools are concrete examples of superstition and prejudice. By their very existence, segregated institutions contradict and mock attempts to teach democratic and human values.

Black children who are required to attend racially segregated schools learn early that they are the victims of a democratic sham. They not only question their value as human beings but they also question the validity of an educational process and the educators who impose this dehumanization upon them.

By their silence, educators are accessories to the perpetuation of this damage on powerless human beings. Less clearly understood by the public and by educators is the fact that racially segregated schools and their inherent reinforcement of racial prejudices also severely damage the white children that society seeks to protect. While these children may not suffer the degree of academic retardation suffered by black children, racially segregated schools impose on white children severe and debilitating moral and ethical retardation. Unfortunately the eloquent *Brown* decision did not emphasize this fact.

At the same time that parents, teachers, and clergy are teaching white children democratic principles and values, segregated schools are violating those principles and values. Some children seek to resolve these conflicts with guilt feelings or by accepting uncritically the rationalizations and stereotypes of society, thus intensifying hostility toward minorities.

Whatever their pattern of adjusting to the inescapable conflicts inherent in racially segregated schools in American democracy, white children are not being educated to cope effectively in a world in which two-thirds of the people are not white. In order to be able to interact with diverse peoples, American students cannot be burdened with non-adaptive stereotypes, unrealistic hostilities, and social awkwardness. The diversity of the American population is a valuable asset in preparing all children for a positive role in international communication and interaction.

### The Responsibility of Educators

Given this perspective, what then is the responsibility, indeed the obligation, of American educators 30 years after the *Brown* decision and in the midst of the technological and nuclear age? How can educators now compensate for their past silence and try to help the American public understand that it is imperative to eliminate the anachronism of a racially segregated educational system?

American educators and their associations must have the courage to say to the American people that racially segre-

gated schools impair the attainment of the goals of a democratic education. Educators must assume the risks, insisting repeatedly that a civilization based upon justice cannot be communicated to the young in an educational system that reinforces rejection and hostility. Educators must point to the clear fact that segregated educational institutions are institutionalized injustices. Educators cannot follow the tyranny of the masses; they must be moral leaders.

Until now, the leaders in racial progress in America have been the courts, the legal profession, and some public officials. But they have gone almost as far as they can go in articulating the requirements of social justice in the United States. It is now up to educational leaders to insist that there be unqualified justice, equality, and humanity in our schools.

Specifically, we must now insist that in the training of teachers and supervisors, the *Brown* decision be required reading. Every teacher-training institution and education association should conduct periodic seminars on the substance and meaning of the decision. Examinations for teachers and for promotion of supervisors should be based upon their understanding of the letter and spirit of this important democratic document. This should be supported by well-planned inservice training.

Desegregating schools is only a first step. In addition, students from diverse backgrounds should be permitted to learn from each other, cooperate with each other, and develop a sense of their common anxieties and aspirations. Educators should insist that the isolation of students in terms of race, economic status, and intellectual potential is intolerable and cruel and counter to the goals of education in a democracy. Through seminars, discussion groups, and sensitivity training sessions, American race relations and personal attitudes and conflicts should be made part of the social studies and humanities curriculum of every American public school.

Educators must respect and encourage each child placed in their charge. This responsibility is awesome, but essential to future peace and justice and to a dynamic, humane civilization. □

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