

The Negro Morton's Fork: How the 1954 Brown Decision Forced African-American Educators to Choose between Decimation and Assimilation

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Abstract

This article will discuss the Negro Morton's Fork: the dilemma Black educators after the 1954 Brown Decision that forced them to choose between two equally unpleasant alternatives: decimation and assimilation. Faced with professional eradication; Black educators seemingly had no alternative than to become participants in a system that was designed to marginalize minority and poor students. The article begins with a post Brown era historical documentation of the injustices suffered by Black educators during the disintegration of the black education system post Brown and then offers sobering evidence that the consequences of the forced choice reverberates today in our nation's schools.

Introduction

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown V. Topeka Board of Education* represented a philosophical and legal shift from blacks demanding equalization of educational resources embedded in the 1896 *Plessy* decision; to an insistence of their acceptance into an integrated society with the goal being to end the second-class citizenship perpetuated in slavery and *Ole Jim Crow*. While the court victory was publicly lauded as a transformative moment in race relations in our nation; it also led to a recalibration of White oppression resulting in a carefully orchestrated and intentional plan by the White power structure to systematically redefine the educational landscape. Central to this plan was the Supreme Court justices' reasoning: "The harm-deprivation of "equal" educational opportunity-is thought to be suffered by "children of the minority group," not at all, apparently, by children of the majority group, that is, White children (Davis & Graham, 1995). Whites seized upon this premise and Brown Decision's ambiguous implementation timeline and ineffectual enforcement to legally demolish the Black educational system that had underpinned the struggle for equality. A system that even though it was historically underfunded and maligned; had produced numerous talented Black professionals and artisans while serving as a catalyst for social and political change. Black educators and their schools immediately became casualties in the war to desegregate and demolish the dual educational system. At that pivotal moment; Black school teachers and administrators were forced into a fateful choice between decimation and assimilation. That *Negro Morton's Fork* has reverberated throughout American history and directly affected the trajectory of education for marginalized student populations. It has also led to a significant number of Black educators becoming participants in other more insidious form of legal institutionalized oppression.

This article will discuss the dilemma Black educators found themselves in after the 1954 Brown Decision that forced them to choose between two equally unpleasant alternatives. Faced with professional eradication; Black educators seemingly had no alternative than to become participants in a system that was designed to marginalize minority and poor students. The article begins with a post Brown era historical documentation of the injustices

suffered by Black educators during the disintegration of the black education system post Brown and then offers sobering evidence that the consequences of the forced choice reverberates today in our nation's schools.

Post-Brown Injustice for Blacks in Education

To be clear; the Separate but Equal era before Brown was more separate than equal and was designed to perpetuate as much as to somehow normalize the insidious effects of discrimination; especially in the preparation of Black educators. It is clear that the 1896 Plessy decision was the judicial seal of approval of educational segregation and the Brown decision overturned that principle. This was the result of a series of court challenges to Plessy led by Charles Houston and Thurgood Marshall. The historic Brown decision was the culmination of an ongoing resistance that sought equality in resources, but then morphed into a battle for integration and destruction of the inherently unequal system. The schools were the preferred battleground and from that series of complaints all rolled up into the Brown case; there arose a distinct shift away from the premise of Plessy. Brown was a controversial departure from the NAACP's previous efforts to force segregationists to equalize, or actually make separate schools and its facilities equals and available to African Americans (Carson, 2004). The Brown decision delivered on some of its promises in the transfer of Black bodies into spaces once only occupied by White bodies. Ironically, Brown did not accomplish what many saw as its primary mission: to serve as a positive social change agent that would lead the way in improving societal racial harmony. It could be argued that the Brown decision did quite the opposite – leading to a level of polarization and retrenchment from White supremacists both in our schools and society. Beyond forced busing and white flight; the Brown Decision did not elevate or preserve black schools, black students and black educators, but sought to systematically wipe them out of existence. Black school administrators, teachers and students would suffer through a series of terrible actions associated with the backlash from the White Supremacists, whose primary goal was to preserve their power and privilege. The Black philosophical and legal shift from demanding equalization of educational resources to an insistence of acceptance into an integrated society did not end Ole Jim Crow; but set the stage for a more insidious form of legal institutionalized oppression: The New Jim Crow.

The training of Black teachers was, of course, an essential step leading to the required increase in the number of Black elementary and secondary schools. For most of the separate but equal era, however, the underfunded Black public colleges, with their small enrollments of underprepared students, were unable to satisfy the need for more Black teachers (Kujovich, 1994). Black colleges struggled to survive in a system that was designed by whites to pre-determine the economic future of Blacks by ensuring that their educational choices were limited to industrial and service training. The closed system of public education, from elementary school to college, served the social, economic, and educational caste system that determined Black status in American society. The perversion of public education to impede rather than to facilitate social mobility was even more evident in the small part of the Black college educational program that was not designed solely for the training of teachers (Kujovich, 1994 p.69). But even with the constraints of this era; Black colleges and Black education in general made enormous strides and through their accomplishment in the face of these formidable odds; laid the foundation for the Black Middle class and the future economic and political gains of the race. This article is not an attempt to disparage and criticize the training and preparation of Black educators during that period; nor is it an effort to critique the choices this group made after the Brown decision. It is an attempt to understand and explain how their lack of a choice has led to many of the maladies that Blacks suffer through today in this so-called integrated school system that the Brown decision has supposedly produced. It will also begin a discussion on what role Black educators might take in the future.

Historically, there are numerous examples of the White power structure eliminating and otherwise limiting the educational opportunities of Blacks. These were purposeful efforts as Whites fully understand then and now that an uneducated or mis-educated Black is equally debilitated and it increases the likelihood that person will remain a second-class citizen. Blacks have always shouldered an overwhelming and disproportionate amount of the burden and pain associated with the inadequacy of our nation's schools to offer minority children adequate resources and opportunities equal to those of their White peers and that continues even today. During the Post-Brown era of integration and assimilation; Black and brown students have suffered in ways that should have been predicted or expected based upon the history of American education. The Black community fully understood that they had to weather the storm of White resistance after the 1954 Brown Decision. Blacks learned that painful lesson during the Post-Civil War Reconstruction and ensuing eras understanding that every significant political,

educational and/or economic gain by Blacks resulted in a convulsive and violent White backlash. The eruption of White violence always served both as a flashpoint and as a reactant leading to the legalization and memorialization of institutional barriers that demonized and marginalized Black bodies. The Wilmington Massacre of 1898, the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, and the Rosewood Massacre of 1923 are knitted into the racial fabric of a nation that saw Blacks suffer through white supremacist terrorism in more than three dozen cities across the United States during the infamous Red Summer of 1919.

The destruction and replacement of segregated schools that once sought to shield, protect and guide the development of Black youth with schools that are instrumental in embedding racism under the guise of integration has led to an increased level of marginalization for Black students. Marginalization exists and is perpetuated when the dominant group's culturally deeply embedded values, beliefs, standards, and norms determine acceptability of other sub-groups within a certain social framework (Leonard, 1984). The landmark 1954 *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education* did lead to a deluge of legal decisions and legislation most of which were aimed at limiting or ending the evils of the judicial segregation of the nation's schools. This was to be accomplished by the purposeful dismantling of the dual systems of Pk-12 education, which segregation and Jim Crow had entrenched with both legislation, violence and intimidation. Most of those victories have been marginal at best and lack the ability to counter a dominant cultural belief system that perpetuates White privilege and enforces a social and economic caste system. The primary reason for the assault on the Black educational system after the *Brown* decision was that system had served as the vanguard and catalyst for social change and its demolition would perpetuate White privilege and supremacy.

Schools for Black and poor students were systematically destroyed, Black teachers and administrators demoted or terminated, and Black students were subjected to the violence and malevolence of white public school officials; who openly embraced and practiced white supremacy. *Brown* had a negative effect on Black teachers and administrators. Prior to the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka, Kansas* (1954), nearly 82,000 Black teachers taught approximately two million Black students in U.S. public schools (Hawkins, 1994). However, after this landmark court decision and the ensuing desegregation of schools, the number of Black teachers in the workforce began to decline (Foster, 1997), marking the beginning of a long period of loss of Black teachers. After the *Brown* decision, the American Educational system exacted reprisals and retribution on the Black educator work force. 38,000 Black teachers and administrators in twenty-one southern and southern bordering states lost their jobs (Fultz 2004; Hudson and Holmes 1994; Tillman 2004). The often-stated reason for this was the short-sighted and naive official language concerning Black-teacher retention was included in neither the Civil Rights Act of 1964 nor the subsequent federal desegregation guidelines of 1966 (Orfield 1969). In the 1970s and 1980s, further reduction of Black educators occurred as more desegregation orders were enacted and new teacher-certification requirements imposed (Tillman 2004).

Black School principals suffered the same level of vitriol and retribution as Black teachers in the Post-Brown era. Pre-Brown Black principals were committed to the education of Black children, worked with other Black leaders to establish schools for these children, and worked in all-Black schools, usually in substandard conditions (Tillman, 2004). But after *Brown*; Black principals were being threatened with extinction as a result of desegregation (Fultz, 2004) The years 1954 through 1965 were the most devastating for Black principals (Ethridge, 1979). A report by the United States Senate in 1971 showed that the number of Black principals in nine Southern states declined from 1,424 in the mid-1960s to a mere 225 in around 1970 (Buck, 2010). In about three or four years, the number of Black principals had been reduced in these states by more than 84 percent. (Laurence, 1996) Alvis Adair notes that the jobs of some 600 Black principals disappeared between 1964 and 1970 in Texas (Mickelson and Velasco, 2006) while Frederick Rodgers pointed out that between 1963 and 1973, the number of Black principals in North Carolina dropped from 226 to a mere 15 (Ferguson, 2004). There was sad irony in the fact that Whites pushed the false narrative that Black principals had been largely ineffective in educating Black children as their rationale for removing them from their leadership roles after *Brown*. Immediately after the *Brown* decision, Whites used the testimony from other so-called White expert witnesses during a series of post desegregation legal proceedings to dismantle all-Black schools and replacing Black principals with Whites (Buck, 2010). Research from that era illustrated the size and swiftness of the calculated efforts to decimate the ranks of Black principals. Oklahoma, Missouri, Kentucky, West Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware closed the majority of their all-Black schools between 1954 and 1965, and more than 50% of the Black principals in these states were dismissed (Ethridge, 1979). Ethridge concluded that "thousands of educational

positions which would have gone to Black people in the South under a segregated system have been lost for them since desegregation" (p. 231). Black principals were being threatened with extinction as a result of desegregation (Fultz, 2004a). Fultz cited a 1971 U.S. Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Opportunity report revealing that Black principals were being eliminated with "avalanche-like force and tempo" (p. 28).

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

Facing a barren and hostile employment landscape after Brown; Black teachers, administrators and Black colleges were forced to make decisions that would impact the education of Black, brown and poor children for decades to come. Integration forced Black educators to assimilate.

Compounding the numerous challenges exacted by this nadir in Black education was the realization that current and future Black educators would have to accept new required policies and practices in the preparation of teachers and principals on the university level. To maintain or gain employment in these newly-integrated schools, Black educators were forced to meet the licensure requirements of their White peers and historically Black universities were required to adjust accordingly with changes in their educator preparation programs. The standardization of a university-based process for educator preparation replete with white privilege and white supremacist ideology; to train Black educators was and is problematic. The assimilation of Black educators into a system that had a history of discrimination and marginalization of racial and ethnic groups is itself destructive and counterproductive to efforts to offer marginalized students the quality education they deserve.

In the essay "Another Vanishing American: The Black Principal," James (1970) observed that Black principals were "prime victims" of the move from a dual to a unitary system of schools. It appears that not only has desegregation led to the disastrous elimination of Black School administrators and teachers from the influential position they held in their communities and schools; but it has also led to a standardization of their preparation that has stripped them of their once rock-solid connection to Black youth. No longer are Black educators guiding these students through a society that had designed institutionalized tools to marginalize them and drastically reduce the probability that they will survive or succeed. This standardization of educator preparation has led to a constant shortage of Black teachers and administrators. Research has indicated that there is a lack of Blacks in the teacher pipeline because of entrance exams for admission to schools of education (Gitomer, Latham, & Ziomek, 1999; Murnane et al., 1991). The difficulty levels of these entrance exams and low passing rates for Black candidates in general may have discouraged some Black college students from choosing education as a major or course of graduate study (McNeal & Lawrence, 2009; Murnane et al., 1991). Hudson and Holmes' (1994) asserted that:

...the loss of African American teachers in public school settings has had a lasting negative impact on all students, particularly African American students and the communities in which they reside... [A]lthough the shrinking African American teacher pool has been attributable to several factors, it is partly a fall-out of how Brown was implemented by White American policy makers"

Post-Brown Black principals and administrators were seldom given the opportunity to work in high-achieving school districts, which were often predominately White. They have always been hired and assigned to the most challenging urban and rural districts full of high-need students, limited resources, and steeper accountability goals. These assignments have become a form of professional purgatory as Black school administrators suffered from lower wages, less opportunity for advancement, intense public scrutiny and disdain for their failure to perform educational miracles. They have persisted in the spirit and context of the Pre-Brown era and adapted to meet the demands of the Post-Brown era.

Next Chapter for Black Educators

It appeared that Black educators were faced with a dilemma after the 1954 Brown Decision, when in fact they were not given a viable option to choose. The dual educational system was inherently unequal and its longevity was contingent upon white supremacy. The Brown Decision hastened the development of a so-called integrated educational system that was oppressive by design as it was based upon the premise that segregation harmed the Negro child and not the white child. The current education system utilizes legal institutional tools to marginalize poor, Black and brown students; including minority teachers and leaders; whose assimilation into teacher and leader preparation programs train them to maintain the status quo

In the sixty years since Brown, it is clear that this and other legislation has been effective in the fight to eliminate the vestiges of Jim Crow and second class citizenship; but much more needs to be done. Blacks as a group still lag behind whites in many of the most important social measures of well-being and success—household income, infant mortality, life expectancy, educational opportunity, and employment levels (Outlaw, 2004). Although mandated segregation is forbidden by law, many blacks are practically segregated from whites in both housing and educational opportunities. The alarming trend of re-segregation of our nation's schools ironically has occurred due to legislation and Supreme Court decisions that chip away at the already crumbling foundation of Brown. The re-segregation of our nation's schools offers another opportunity for Black educators to become advocates and activists for social change. According to data from the National Center on Education Statistics, the number of segregated schools (defined as those schools where less than 40 percent of students are white), has approximately doubled between 1996 and 2016. In that same span, the percentage of children of color attending such a school rose from 59 to 66 percent. For Black students, the percentage in segregated schools rose even faster, from 59 to 71 percent. The promises and failures of Black advancement in the second half of the twentieth century have brought the differences between the anti-classification and anti-subordination approaches into starker contrast. And, in the process, the meaning and legacy of Brown have become a terrain of struggle and controversy (Davis & Graham, 1995).

Integration and the move to physically place Black bodies in spaces formally occupied only by White students has resulted in both unintended and intended consequences. Some of them very positive for both Black and White youth but others have been disastrous and negative. It's well documented that there are racial disparities in school suspensions, expulsions, and arrests. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) notes that Black high school students are still twice as likely (12.8 percent) to be suspended as white (6.1 percent) or Hispanic (6.3 percent) high school students. And students with a disability are also twice as likely (12.8 percent) to be suspended as those without a disability (6.9 percent). Black and Brown students also continue to suffer academically on our public schools. In 2000 and 2016, a higher percentage of Black students than of White students were retained. The percentage of Hispanic students who were retained was also higher than the percentage of White students retained for most years over the same period (NCES, 2016).

In our current state of high-stakes testing and increased accountability, much of the focus of school leadership has shifted to a laser-like focus on student achievement of standardized assessments. This has led to the systematic dehumanization of students that has reduced each of them to a test score. These policies have had an even greater negative effect on marginalized student sub-populations as it erases their uniqueness and humanity reducing them to a numerical value that must be manipulated only enough to produce the required range of academic mediocrity. These students are disenchanting with their schools because the schools; teachers, principals and support staff, appear to simply want to have enough contact with them to ensure compliance with regulatory accountability.

Some scholars suggested that educational institutions transform social inequalities into seemingly natural scholastic inequalities (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2002). Indeed, many educational practices are conducive to the unequal treatment of students with differing social backgrounds. One of the most pervasive of these practices is assessment (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977; Yosso, 2002). Kozol (2005) correctly asserts that, in our current obsession with standardized tests “the stripping away of cultural integrity and texture from the intellectual experience of children, denial of delight in what is beautiful and stimulating for its own sake and not for its acquisitional equivalents, is a perennial calamity” (p. 119-120).

Each of these components appear to fit appropriately into that orchestrated and intentional plan by the White power structure to systematically redefine the economic and political landscape in America. It is the New Jim Crow. In her book; *The New Jim Crow* (2010); Michele Alexander captured in stark detail how America has reconfigured its socio-economic caste system by employing new strategies; many which have been introduced and presented as possible solutions to societal problems. These new solutions have led one to the prosecution and imprisonment of millions of African Americans. This nefarious strategy re-introduces bondage and oppression by legally locking up millions of poor, Black, and Brown people, which then relegated to a permanent second-class status. This is a calculated effort to rollback and deny some of hard-fought civil rights supposedly won in the Civil Rights Movement. The schools plays an integral part in this scheme by negating their dominant role as social change agent. A close examination of these interventions leaves open the question of whether the negative results and consequences on Blacks was either unintended or intended as part of the systematic mission to preserve White supremacy and Privilege

The discussion must shift from what Brown produced to what it did not produce and how Black educators can themselves become the agents of change in the current era of the School to Prison Pipeline, overrepresentation of Blacks in special education; a persistent achievement gap and a plethora of outcomes that result in the systematic marginalization of Black and brown children. In addition, the quality of an education is a fundamental determinant of health (Hahn & Truman, 2015) and economic success (Wolla & Sullivan, 2017); which offers a unique perspective on the stakes in this societal maelstrom. The discussion must also include what the role of the Black Teacher and Black Principal will play today and in the future as the lingering challenge of Black and Brown children underachieving continues to define not only our culture but our nation. What then of the black teacher? The thousands of teachers trained at Black institutions before Brown helped form the core of a Black professional class and a growing population of college-educated Blacks. From those graduates came many of the leaders of the black population during the challenge to segregation and inequality (Kujovich, p.75). How and when does the mobilization of the Black teacher to re-imagine their role as social change agent begin and is it possible for them to even accept that responsibility? Do Black teachers see themselves like their Pre-Brown peers or has integration equaled assimilation? What then on the Black Principal? The findings from the studies reviewed suggest that Black principal leaders rewrote history, redefined theory and practice, and rejected deficit theories about school leadership and the education of Black children. In the spirit in which Brown was intended, Black principal-leaders were transformers, translators, and cultivators (Tillman, p.133). What is their role today? To maintain the status quo within this unjust educational system or to reclaim the mantle of leadership from which they transformed the lives of the most oppressed and downtrodden?

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